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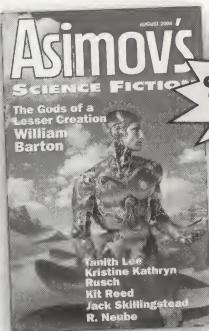
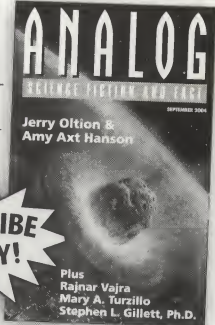
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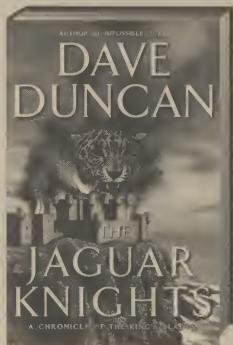
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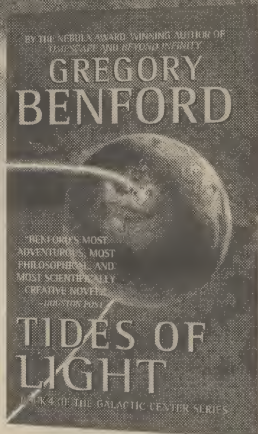
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FAR OUT

In last month's column I discussed the recent resurgence of interest in space exploration, kicked off by the successful landings on Mars in January of two roving vehicles, followed by President Bush's call for manned missions to the Moon and eventually to Mars. All this is well and good, after a long period of pseudo-activity in space centering around such go-nowhere projects as the shuttle program and the international space station.

But while we are waiting for the new Moon and Mars enterprises to negotiate the hazardous shoals of the political process, there are other things we can be doing in space, and with the twenty-first century ticking along, it seems appropriate to talk about them here, in what is, after all, a science fiction magazine devoted to speculation about the future of technology (among other things.) For instance—

1. *Another Hubble Space Telescope.* The first one, launched in 1990 and much improved by a later tweaking, has sent back fantastic pictures from space. The particular one that I have in mind, which was the subject of a column here in 1996, showed three newborn stars, eight or ten times as massive as our own sun, in the Eagle Nebula, M16 in the constellation known as Serpens, seven thousand light-years distant from Earth. I said at the time that it was the most awe-some photograph ever taken.

We have since launched three

other space-based telescopes in what we call the Great Observatory series. The Compton Gamma Ray Observatory, up there from 1991 to 1999, did yeoman work in its time in a high-energy area outside that of conventional telescopes. The Chandra X-Ray Observatory, placed in orbit in 1999, has worked in yet another segment of the electronic spectrum to study radiation from supernovas and black holes that is blocked from earthbound telescopes by our planet's atmosphere. The third, launched in August 2003, is the Space Infrared Telescope Facility, now known as the Spitzer Space Telescope in honor of the great Princeton astronomer Lyman Spitzer, Jr., who first proposed launching telescopes into space in 1946. The Spitzer, which operates at minus 450 degrees Fahrenheit, is able to give us a look at objects inaccessible to conventional telescopes. The first images from the Spitzer, released in December 2003, were startling. Among them are pictures of a vast cloud of gas called the Elephant Trunk nebula, a stellar nursery where new stars are forming 2,500 light-years away that until now has been hidden from us by cosmic dust; of a young star called HH 46, from which curved shock-waves of gas are emanating; of a galaxy 3.25 billion light-years away, invisible to other types of telescope, that glows with an energy a thousand times that of the Milky Way; and much more.

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This formidable array of telescopes allows us to perceive the universe across the whole spectrum of visible and invisible light. But it is already doomed. The Spitzer will cease to function in six years. The Compton is already gone. The Chandra's time is running out. And now, with spectacularly bad timing, NASA has announced a death sentence for the Hubble itself: it is canceling a planned shuttle trip to the orbiting telescope to replace its batteries and install two hundred million dollars' worth of new instruments, because shuttle travel is now deemed too risky after the *Columbia* disaster. Somewhere in the next few years, probably in 2007, the Hubble will cease to function.

That will leave us with no space-situated telescopes at all, at least until the planned James Webb Infrared Telescope is launched in 2011. This is a Bad Thing: these telescopes are bringing us a treasurehouse of information about how the universe works. The only silver lining I see in the killing of the Hubble is that perhaps the bureaucrats' intention in writing it off is to create momentum for the launching of a Hubble II, ten or fifteen years down the line, employing advanced technologies already well along in development that will make its predecessor seem like a Kodak Brownie. (The capacity to examine in detail the planets orbiting other stars, perhaps even to detect whether there is water on them, for instance.)

2. *Fund research in teleportation.* I'm not kidding. In a column published here last year, I pointed out that the universe is probably full of inhabited worlds, but we won't ever know about them because

they are so far away that the nasty old limiting-velocity rule, which makes the speed of light the absolute fastest we can travel, renders contact with them impossible. Of course, science fiction writers have sidestepped that problem with all sorts of warp drives, worm-hole routes, and other non-Einsteinian gimmicks. In a story of my own called "We Are for the Dark," published in this magazine in 1988, I even posited a system of faster-than-light travel involving transmission via matter-antimatter annihilation. But none of us ever took any of our faster-than-light stuff seriously except as a glib means of getting on with our tales of galactic exploration.

Now, though, I hear that actual experiments in matter transmission have been going on since 1997. Not *much* matter: the first experiments, kicked off by IBM researcher Charles Bennett, involved transporting photons—particles of light—which are very small items indeed. The idea is to use "quantum entanglement," in which a laser beam is subjected to stress in such a way that it creates two particles of light at once. A strange linkage, apparently, connects these particles, so that even when they are at a great distance from one another a disturbance to one will affect the other. (Einstein, it seems, knew about this and called it "spooky interaction.")

The Bennett proposal called for putting a third "message" particle into the package, thereby transferring its properties to both sets of particles. Through some sort of hocus-pocus that I will unashamedly tell you I don't begin to understand, the "message" winds up both at the sending and receiving ends

of the deal simultaneously, even if the receiving end is halfway across the galaxy. Experiments have now been made involving "qubits," which are units of information ("two-dimensional quantum systems"). Scientists at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, and the University of Geneva in Switzerland succeeded late in 2003 in transporting qubits via photon teleportation a distance of 178 feet by sending them through a mile and a quarter of standard fiber-optic cable.

Whether this will lead us to the stars, I can't say. As far as I'm able to unpack the research report, it seems to indicate that in the present state of the art, teleportation will apply only to photons, and some sort of conventional transmission system is required, which means that the speed of light is still the limiting velocity and nothing bigger than a particle of light can be shipped. That still leaves us some distance from having the gizmos that allow us to step into a box here and instantaneously step out of an identical box on Betelgeuse IX. But who knows what a few trillion additional dollars of research can produce? Those of you who find the idea of teleportation across the galaxy exciting can find more information about all this at *cool-tech.iafrica.com* by asking about "quantum teleportation," and good luck to you in your travels.

3. Privatizing the Moon. The Bush let's-build-a-base-on-the-Moon scheme is already in budgetary hot water, with the usual politicians raising the usual outcry about taking money away from starving babies and deserving elders in order to fund foolish space adventures. (As though the money spent on space travel is simply

packed aboard a rocket and shipped off to nowhere, instead of being spent on salaries for hundreds of thousands of engineers and technicians right here in the U.S.A.) So perhaps the only way we're ever going to get off the dime here is to turn space exploration over to the greedy, heartless corporations and let them go searching for profit in the darkness of the interplanetary vacuum.

Robert A. Heinlein said it all in a story written more than fifty years ago, "The Man Who Sold the Moon," in which a hard-nosed, unscrupulous, conniving tycoon named D.D. Harriman whips up a free-enterprise space program all by himself. Here is how Heinlein, prescient as usual, starts things off:

"You've got to be a believer!"

George Strong snorted at his partner's declaration. "Delos, why don't you give up? Maybe someday men will get to the Moon, though I doubt it. In any case, you and I will never live to see it. The loss of the power satellite washes things up for our generation."

D.D. Harriman grunted. "We won't see it if we sit on our fat behinds and don't do anything to make it happen. But we can make it happen."

"Question number one: how? Question number two: why?"

"Why?" The man asks 'why'? George, isn't there anything in your soul but discounts and dividends? Didn't you ever sit with a girl on a soft summer night and stare up at the Moon, and wonder what was there?"

But Harriman sees more than romantic yearnings in going to the Moon. He sees hard dollars-and-

cents return. "This is the greatest real estate venture since the Pope carved up the New World. Don't ask me what we'll make a profit on; I can't itemize the assets—but I can lump them. The assets are a planet—a *whole planet!* And more planets beyond it. If we can't figure out ways to swindle a few fast bucks out of a sweet set-up like that, then you and I had both better go on relief."

And so, by hook and by crook, D.D. Harriman sells the idea of going to the Moon to a band of rapacious venture capitalists, and they build a ship and send it up into the sky. Maybe the Harriman option is the one we should go for. Wind up NASA, turn space over to the cold-eyed entrepreneurs, and devote the Federal budget to succoring the unfortunate and paying the medical bills of the senior citizens (a

group to which I happen to belong.) Then run an auction for lunar real estate, with the proceeds going to the UN to devote to worthy humanitarian and environmental causes, and let the high-bidding hotel chains and mining companies and power combines plaster Luna with their advertising billboards.

If we don't, I'm afraid, those billboards will get there anyway in the next half century, but they'll be in Chinese. The Chinese pretend not to be capitalists, but they could teach D.D. Harriman a thing or two about exploitation, and they definitely have their eyes trained on space.

So there you are: on beyond the shuttle program to newer and better space telescopes, expanded research in teleportation, and the privatization of space exploration. It's worth thinking about, anyway. ○

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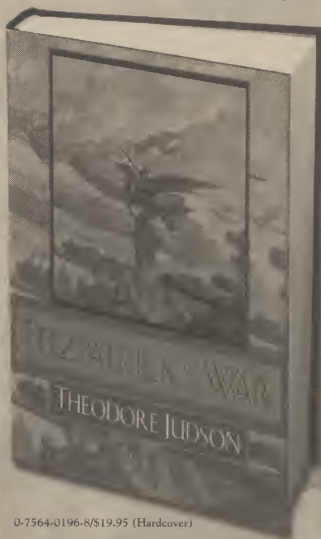


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Thirty years ago Toronto held its second WorldCon, which oddly enough was also my second WorldCon.

I was living in Chicago at the time, fighting the war on poverty as a VISTA volunteer while directing chess tournaments on weekends and writing stories at night to supplement the fifty dollars a week I got from VISTA. Even with three jobs, I could not have afforded to fly. Fortunately Alex and Phyllis Eisenstein offered me a lift. The con still strained my budget, though as a professional writer, I was able to write off everything: hotel room, meals, travel. According to my tax return for 1973, it came to \$130.03.

The late, great Robert Bloch was the Guest of Honor at that TorCon, as he had been at the first Toronto WorldCon back in 1948. Bloch gave his speech at the Hugo banquet. Theater-style Hugo presentations didn't come until Big Mac, the ground-breaking Kansas City WorldCon of 1976. Before that, there was always a banquet, and the Guests of Honor—there were only two back then, Pro and Fan—delivered their addresses before the rocket ships were handed out. The speeches and the awards combined to give each convention a

center that modern WorldCons no longer have.

On the other hand, Bob Bloch and the guests before him also had to contend with clattering plates and groaning stomachs, and restless audiences impatient to find out who'd won the Hugos. I've given enough speeches of my own to know that when you come after the baked Alaska and before the bowl-ing trophies, it's best to keep it short and funny. Which is what Bloch did, as I recall.

That's not what I'll be doing, though. Even with thirty years distance between us, the author of *Psycho* is too tough an act to follow. He was blessed with a mordant wit, deadpan delivery, and a perfect sense of comic timing. He was sort of a cross between Bob Hope, Alfred Hitchcock, and Connie Willis, though he had a cigarette holder instead of a dress with a Peter Pan collar. Besides, if you try to give a funny speech and no one laughs . . . well, there are a few things in life more painful, like root canals, SFWA business meetings, listening to William Shatner sing "Rocket Man," but still. . . .

I'm not going to give the fans-are-slans speech either. Mind you, I love fans. I *am* a fan. We're a swell bunch of fellows and gals, no doubt of it, but we're not superior to the general run of humanity, we're not the last best hope for Earth. "You're the ones who will be leading us to the stars," I've heard speakers tell con audiences. You hear the same

speech at Nebula banquets, only there it's the Eliot Rosewater speech. "You're special!" the speaker says, "you're unique! There's no one as great as you guys, no one else who *really* knows what's going on, no one with your amazing perception and insight!" Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah for us. It's a speech suitable for all occasions, and I'm sure Buick dealers, taxidermists, and the Woodmen of the World enjoy hearing it at their conventions too. But I won't be giving it today.

Nor am I going to talk about the state of the field. The truth is, I don't know much about the state of the field. No one does, except maybe Charlie Brown, and he's not telling. The field has simply grown too big. Gardner Dozois and David G. Hartwell can speak with some authority about the state of short fiction, but even they can't read all the novels being published, and novels have been the heart of SF and fantasy for many years now. If you want to hear about the state of the field, go to some of the panels, and you'll hear a goodly number of bright people talking about some aspect of the little piece of the field that they're currently involved in. If you listen to enough of them, some picture may emerge. Where the state of the field is concerned, we're all blind men trying to describe the elephant.

Instead I've decided to talk about the one subject on which I am unquestionably the world's foremost authority: me.

After all, there's no rubber chicken or baked Alaska here, and I'm not handing out any rocket ships this afternoon . . . or getting any either, more's the pity. Sure, maybe a few of you wandered in here by mistake, looking for the gaming

room or the panel on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but I have to presume the majority of you are here because you've read my work.

I don't want to talk about my work, though. Not as such. Those of you who have visited the hucksters' room will know that I have a huge new retrospective collection out from Subterranean Press. *GRRM*, it's called, half a million words of my work, SF, fantasy, horror, with extensive commentaries where I discuss how and when I came to each genre, my literary influences from F. Scott Fitzgerald and J.R.R. Tolkien to Stan Lee and Gardner Fox, how I came to write this story, what inspired that one, where the other came from. All the stories behind the stories are there, if that sort of stuff interests you. I won't rehash it here.

Instead I'd like to talk about the place where *all* my stories come from. Everything I've ever written from Garizan the Mechanical Warrior to *A Song of Ice and Fire*.

I'd like to talk about Bayonne, New Jersey.

For those of you who've never been there, which I presume is most of you, Bayonne is a peninsula, so close to New York City that it's almost part of it. Brooklyn's due east across New York Bay, Manhattan is northeast, and south across the Kill Von Kull lies Staten Island, one of the city's five boroughs.

In colonial days, New York and New Jersey both claimed Staten Island, which is much closer to Bayonne than to Manhattan. The matter was finally settled by a boat race around the island. New York won, and New Jersey remains pissed about it to this day. Like Italy, Bayonne is shaped like a boot, although Bayonne's boot looks as though it

was made for someone with a club-foot. The city is three miles long and one mile wide at its widest point, down by the foot.

I was born in Bayonne Hospital on September 20, 1948. Both of my parents had been born and raised in Bayonne, as had three of my four grandparents. Despite its proximity to New York, Bayonne was in no sense a bedroom community, then or even now. It was a city unto itself . . . a *world* unto itself, really. You could buy just about anything you might need in the shops on Broadway, and there were plenty of jobs out on the Hook, and more on the Navy base. Bayonne was a place where generations of people were born, grew up, went to school, found work, got married, had kids, bought their own house or moved upstairs of their parents, grew old, and died, all within the three square miles of the city.

A densely populated industrial city of approximately seventy thousand people, Bayonne had been the largest oil refining center in the country during World War II. Many of the legendary battleships and destroyers of World War II were fitted out in Bayonne's Navy base and drydock before steaming forth to fight Tojo and Hitler. It was a working class city, dense, urban, ethnic.

A century before, the city had been a very different place. In the early nineteenth century, Bayonne had been a community of small farmers and fishermen, renowned for its oysters. Surrounded by its bays, it became a center for yachting and boat building after the Civil War, and a holiday retreat for wealthy gentry. New Yorkers would take steam ferries across the bay or sail their yachts up the Kill Von Kull to stay at Hotel LaTourette, a

huge Victorian resort hotel. Surrounded by old oaks and rolling lawns, the LaTourette offered fine dining, fishing, sailing, croquet, and splendid views across the water to the wilds of Staten Island.

That was all long before my time, of course . . . though my mother remembered the LaTourette. She was born in 1918 and grew up in a house on Lord Avenue, between 3rd Street and 4th Street. Bayonne's days as a fashionable resort were long over by the time she was a girl, but the LaTourette still stood beside the water down at the foot of Lord Avenue, boarded up and decaying. To my mother and her brothers and sisters, it was "the haunted house." They would dare each other to knock upon its boarded up doors, and the boys would throw rocks at the windows of the old Victorian monstrosity. Woods surrounded it, my mother used to tell me; there were only a few houses below 3rd Street when she was a girl.

The Bayonne of my own childhood was much changed. There were no woods and no haunted houses, though we did have a lot of pizza parlors. The best pizza in the world comes from Bayonne. By the 1950s, the city was predominantly blue collar and overwhelmingly Catholic. We had Irish Catholics, Italian Catholics, and Polish Catholics. Each nationality had its own church, its own school, and its own parades on its own feast days for its own saints. I had a foot in two of those camps, since my father was half Italian and my mother was half Irish.

Though neither of my parents was religious, they sent us off to Mass every Sunday, even though they never went themselves. We

attended St. Andrew's, the Irish Catholic church on 4th Street.

Of course we did. My mother was a Brady.

Margaret was the youngest of eleven children. Her father, Thomas Brady, was the son of James Brady, who had emigrated to the United States in 1854 from Oldcastle in County Meath, Ireland, following in the footsteps of his brothers and cousins. Many of those Bradys had wound up in Bayonne, where they married other Irish, had children, started businesses, and did very well. One ran Bayonne's largest coal and ice company. Another built the city's first brick building, Brady's Hall, a tavern and dance hall for Irish workingmen. Political meetings were held at Brady's Hall as well. Bradys served as county health commissioner, sheriff, and mayor of Bayonne, and were prominent members of St. Andrew's Parish.

James Brady, my great-grandfather, prospered as well. After a few years as a laborer, he founded a building supply company in 1872, dealing in gravel, concrete, plaster, and wood. A lot of building went on in Bayonne between the Civil War and the Great Depression, so the company did very well, despite the fact that James had been blinded in a construction accident.

Moving building materials by horsedrawn wagon over the roads of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was slow and sometimes difficult. Since Bayonne was a peninsula, it was often easier and cheaper to ship wood and concrete and gravel by water, so James bought some land on the Kill Von Kull near the defunct Hotel LaTourette and built a private dock for the company. James had

his offices on the dock and, according to family legend, he would listen to the barges being offloaded onto his wagons and know at once whether he had gotten all the tonnage he had paid for, just from the sounds.

His sons followed him into the business, which became known as James Brady's Sons. The family became wealthy. Not Rockefeller wealthy, mind you, but Bayonne wealthy. When James died in 1907, my grandfather Thomas and his brothers took over James Brady's Sons, and the company continued to prosper. Between the turn of the century and the Great War, they were among Bayonne's most prominent and successful families. St. Andrew's Church is full of statuary and carved marble altars donated by various Bradys, with little plaques to commemorate the donors. Thomas married into another prominent Bayonne family, the Walls, whose ancestry was English and French. My grandmother Catherine had three sisters, all close to her in age; the four Wall girls were so inseparable at social events, my mother told me, that everyone referred to them as "the Room." But Thomas Brady took one of the Walls from the Room, wed her, and built her that house on Lord Avenue not far from Brady's Dock. Together they had those eleven children . . . the last of whom was my mother, Margaret, from whom I heard these tales. By the time I was old enough to hear all this, tales were all that remained. James Brady's Sons went smash during the Great Depression. The sudden and unexpected death of my grandfather Thomas Brady in 1931 was the mortal blow to a company already staggering. His brothers tried to

carry on, but they were not the kind of businessmen that Thomas had been. In family legend, Mayor Hague, the Boss Tweed of Jersey City, also played a sinister role in the downfall of the Bradys.

My mother always described Hague as a bloated corrupt figure notorious for preying on widows and orphans. Somehow, with connivance of one of my mother's surviving brothers, the black sheep of the family, Hague allegedly managed to loot James Brady's Sons of all its cash and assets, leaving my grandmother Catherine penniless. When she tried to sue, every lawyer she hired suddenly became a judge and dropped her case. The company was broken up and sold off, the dock was taken over by the city. Even the house on Lord Avenue had to be sold.

By that time, only my mother, the youngest of Thomas Brady's eleven children, was still living at home. A number of her siblings had died in childhood; the others had grown up, moved away, and started families of their own. My mother was actually younger than a number of her nieces and nephews. When the wealth and the house were gone, she and her mother moved into a modest apartment. Once out of high school, she took a job at Westinghouse, and supported my grandmother until Catherine passed away in 1941. Some six years after that, Margaret met my father.

His name was Raymond Collins Martin . . . that "Raymond" is where the first of my two Rs originated. My mother called him Ray, and everyone else called him Smokey.

Both my parents smoked, like everyone else in Bayonne in the fifties. Sometimes one or the other of them would give me some money

to get them a pack from a cigarette machine. My mother smoked unfiltered Chesterfields, my father Lucky Strike . . . but whenever they sent me to the cigarette machine, I would come back with Old Golds and claim the machine was out of their brand. Something about the name "Old Gold" made me think of pirates and sunken treasure.


Whenever I smoked my chocolate cigarettes, I pretended they were Old Golds too.

Maybe Smokey started with chocolate cigarettes too. I wouldn't know. I know almost nothing about my father's childhood.

Well, one thing . . . he played marbles. There was an old round thirties-style Animal Crackers tin filled with his old marbles, and inside was a yellowed newspaper about Raymond C. Martin winning the county marbles championship. He never offered to teach me the game, though, never so much as opened that old tin.

My father loved sports—football, baseball, and boxing, especially—but he was a watcher, not a player. We never had a game of catch, never threw a football around the yard. He did try and teach me how to ride a bike. I'd been a demon on a tricycle, and loved whizzing around on my two-wheeler with the training wheels, but once you took those off I had a tendency to lose my balance, crash, and fall.

I got so many scabs and bruises that I begged to put the training wheels back on, but my father would have none of that. If I could not ride without the training wheels, I would not ride at all, he decreed. We tried for a week or so, but I kept crashing and falling. Soon Smokey lost patience and gave



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up in disgust, but he still refused to give me back those training wheels. I never rode a bike again.

My father was a veteran of World War II . . . and according to one man, at least, a war hero. He kept a shoebox full of old photographs from his service, small grainy black and white snapshots taken with some old Brownie. The pictures look to have been taken in North Africa. There's sand, tents, barechested GIs . . . and my father, grinning into the camera, looking impossibly young. In one picture there's a camel in the background. In most of the others Smokey has a Camel dangling from his lip . . . he didn't switch to Luckies until after the war. Some of his buddies are in the pictures, clowning around with their rifles, posing with their arms around his shoulders. I don't know their names. I never will.

In the shoebox there was a portrait shot of a dark-haired, dark-eyed young woman. Italian by the look of her, I'd say . . . but who she was and what she meant to him . . . well, that's something else I'll never know. My mother didn't know either, though I'm sure she wondered.

Though he had no medical training, the army made Smokey a medic when they shipped him overseas. He served in North Africa, in Sicily, and in Italy, and saw quite a bit of combat. He never talked about the war, but I know that once he risked his own life to save some badly wounded men. His captain called it "conspicuous gallantry" and nominated him for the Congressional Medal of Honor. My sister Darleen still has the letter that he wrote. The captain was killed soon after writing that letter, however. Smokey came home from the war with only a Purple Heart . . . that, a

big fat wad of cash, and a honkin' big sapphire.

My father was a gambler, too. Maybe it was in the army that he traded in his marbles for a pair of dice . . . but judging by how well he did, I think he must have known a few things going in. He was good at poker, better at blackjack. He played the numbers every week, and hit once in awhile, but never big. Once or twice a year he went to the track. Every fall he liked to bet on college football. He was pretty good at picking games till I went away to college . . . then some misplaced sense of loyalty made him bet on my school. That would have been great if I'd been at Notre Dame, but, alas, I chose North-western.

He even bet on me. I learned to play chess in seventh grade, and by high school I'd become pretty good. One night I was at home, reading the pirated Ace paperback edition of *The Two Towers*, which had just come out. I'd been waiting half a year since *Fellowship*, and I was Sam and Frodo, making their way toward Cirith Ungol, when the phone rang. My father wanted me to come down to Bilmar's and play a game of chess. I tried to tell him that I was reading a book, but there was no arguing with my father. So I walked to Bilmar's, where I found Smokey in the back room with this short bald guy with no legs. We played a game of chess and I won, after which I figured I'd go home to *The Two Towers*, but no, the guy with no legs insisted on another game. I won that time too, and pretty easily. He was a better player than my father, who knew how the pieces moved and not much else, but he wasn't really good. He thought he was, though, and de-

manded a third game. So we played again. My father bought me Cokes and I crushed the little man with no legs, again and again and again, until finally I'd had enough.

As I was leaving, Smokey pushed a twenty into my palm. My allowance at the time was a dollar a week, most of which I spent on comics and Ace Doubles, so that was a huge windfall. It wasn't till later that I learned that I'd been playing for fifty dollars a game. My father liked to say that he'd taught me how to play chess, but it wasn't true. He tried once, but ran out of patience as quickly as he did when trying to make me ride that bicycle. No, it was my cousin Richie who taught me chess. I learned poker myself in college, along with hearts and contract bridge. Smokey, never even taught me craps . . . and craps was his game, the one he'd played during the war, among the camels and the carnage.

He played it well enough to win that honkin' big sapphire and the ten thousand dollars he'd brought back from Europe. Ten grand was a small fortune in 1946. My father could have bought a nice house with that money. He could have bought a great car. He could have bought five cars. He could have bought a house *and* a car. He could have gone into some sort of business. He could have invested in the stock market, in which case his ten thousand dollars would have grown to several million by now. Instead . . . well . . . he enjoyed it. Women, beer, night-clubs, the track. He had a good time. Ten thousand bucks went a long way then.

Smokey never owned a car. Never drove. He always said that drinking and driving didn't mix . . . and since he sure as hell wasn't going

to give up drinking, he took cabs. When my mother took us kids out somewhere, we all took the bus. If my father was with us, though, everyone squeezed into a cab. He took cabs everywhere. My favorite story about him dates from that postwar period, when he was flush. He was taking a date to a nightclub in New York, and wanted to impress her. So he phoned for two cabs. He told the first cabbie the address and sent it off empty. Then he got into the second cab with his date and said, "Follow that cab."

I never saw that side of him myself. I heard the story from my mother, who'd heard it from his friends. She was *not* the woman in the second cab, sad to say.

By the time Margaret Brady met and married Smokey Martin, he had blown through all of the ten thousand dollars. All he had left from his Army days was that honkin' big sapphire, which wound up on my mother's finger.

As much as my mother loved that sapphire, I suspect she would have loved a house even more. There was a major housing shortage in the years immediately following World War II. Many returning GIs could not find a place to live. Eventually a guy named Levitt would build Levittown, thereby inventing the suburb and solving the problem, but Bayonne had no place to put a suburb, unless you count the bottom of Newark Bay. So when my parents were married, they had no choice but to move in with Ray's mother and grandmother in the big house on 31st Street and Broadway where he had grown up.

That was where I started my own growing up as well. The house was owned by my great-grandmother, Grandma Jones, a stern

old matriarch of German descent. We lived there until I was four and returned to visit every Sunday for years after we moved away. Most of my actual memories of the house are from those visits. By that time, Grandma Jones was bedridden, but that did not make her any less fearsome.

Every Sunday, as soon as we arrived, my sister and I would be marched up to Grandma Jones' bedroom to tell her what we learned in school that week, and woe to us if we'd forgotten a lesson. No teacher I ever had in school was half as terrifying as Grandma Jones lying in that big four-poster bed.

Her house was huge . . . or at least it seemed huge to the child I was. Things are bigger when you're little. Three stories, plus an attic and a basement. It had a coal-fired furnace, so part of the basement was given over to the coal cellar. The coal truck would come by every month or so, lower a chute through the cellar window, and fill us up. The coal would rumble as it went down the chute; you could hear it all over the house. There was a formal dining room, a huge kitchen with a black cast iron stove. That might have been coal-fired too, I don't remember. A back porch as well, and a large fenced yard where I played. In the yard was another building that we called "the shed," but when I see it in the background of old family photos, it looks more like a stable to me. There were never any horses, though . . . that is, unless you count the broomstick horse I rode when I was playing cowboy.

It was in the backyard that I created my first character. I suppose I was about three. Most cowboys had one six-shooter, but some had two,

and that was cooler. Somehow I figured out that three would be even better than two, four would be better than three, and so on. Instead of playing at being Roy Rogers or Hopalong Cassidy or Red Ryder, I told my mother that I was that famous desperado, Lotsa Guns, who had guns in his boots and his cowboy hat and shoved through his belt and *everywhere*. Admittedly, most of my armaments looked suspiciously like sticks . . . but hey, I wouldn't be standing here today without a vivid imagination.

I am often asked when I first began to write. I have been writing since I *could* write, since I first learned to make letters and words . . . but before that, I was making up stories and telling them to people, as witness Lotsa Guns.

Sometimes I think that writing is a form of madness. At the very least, they're close cousins. We dream of lands and times that never were and spend half our waking hours relating conversations that never happened between people who don't exist. You have to be a little nuts to think a stick's a gun. I wonder whether imagination isn't born of need as well. I *had* to make up stories and adventures. If I hadn't, it would have been very lonely in that backyard, with just me and my sticks. I had no friends or playmates. I did have a mother, a grandmother, a great-grandmother, and a great aunt, all of whom read stories to me from a very early age. Some at least were Beatrix Potter stories, I seem to recall, about Peter Rabbit and his less celebrated kin, Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail. There was one especially terrifying story about a weasel trying to eat the rabbits. I couldn't say whether it was Beatrix Potter or some other rabbit writer

who penned that one, but it's the one that I recall most vividly. That weasel *terrified* me, but it was my favorite story all the same.

Besides the stories, I also had a cat, a tough old one-eared Irish tomcat named Patsy who terrorized the local dog . . . and would have disposed of that nasty weasel too, I had no doubt. When I was two I got a little sister, Darleen, but she wasn't much fun at first, and later the main thing she did was eat the rubber tires off of all of my toy trucks.

I didn't know any other kids my age. Broadway was Bayonne's main thoroughfare, and by the 1950s it had become almost entirely commercial from 5th Street to the Jersey City line.

There were no neighborhood kids to play with for the simple reason that there was no neighborhood. Our closest "neighbor" was the Sunshine Laundry, next door. The laundry was a modern building with a flat roof, plate glass windows, and Bayonne's first automatic doors. I never got tired of trying to fool the electric eye, but somehow it always saw me.

Despite our being a residential island in a sea of shops, storefronts, and taverns, Grandma Jones refused to sell. She was a stubborn woman, used to getting her own way, and no one was going to make her move. She'd been a Gasman until she married George Jones, a captain in the Bayonne police. A framed photograph of the captain, looking stern in his police uniform, sat on Grandma Jones's dresser, but that was all I ever knew of him. He was the George that I was named after. Their son was also named George . . . but in the house on Broadway, the dead father was always called Captain

Jones, the living son Georgie Jones. There was also a daughter, my Grandma Grace, who married an Italian immigrant named Louis Martin and produced first my Aunt Gladys and then my father. By the time I came along Gladys had married, moved away, and started a family of her own, but my father, his mother Grace, his uncle Georgie, their mother Grandma Jones, and Grandma Jones's younger sister Aunt Barbry all remained in the house on Broadway.

Not my grandfather, though. Although Louis Martin did not pass away until I was in college, he was as good as dead as far as our family was concerned. The only memory I have of Grandpa Louis is of him throwing me up in the air and catching me in the dining room of that house on Broadway during one of his infrequent visits. He was laughing and I was terrified, as I recall. Louis had been born in Italy, but had come to America with his own father when he was very young, probably no older than I was when he tossed me in the air. The family name was Massacola when they left the Old Country, but over here it was changed to Martin.

By all reports, Louis was a bright, handsome, charming man, but in our family folklore he was a scoundrel. After having two children with my grandmother Grace, he abandoned her and ran off with a younger woman. He didn't run off very far, though. Bayonne people seldom left Bayonne, so Louis and his new lady only moved about twenty blocks up and three over. Supposedly they lived somewhere off the Boulevard, up past 50th Street. My grandmother Grace was a good Catholic, so she never granted Louis a divorce, but that did not

prevent him from fathering several children on the other woman. There was no contact whatsoever between the two Martin families, or between my father and my grandfather. In fact, Smokey would get angry at any mention of his father's name.

Since I never had the chance to ask his side of the story, I don't really know why Louis left Grace and abandoned his children, but I suspect he was fleeing his mother-in-law as much as he was his wife. My grandmother Grace was a sweet, kind, gentle woman, but Grandma Jones was made of sterner stuff. The captain's widow ruled that house on Broadway with an iron fist, in small ways and big ones both. Take Christmas. My sisters and I never opened our presents on Christmas morning. Instead we were woken at midnight on Christmas Eve for milk and sugar cookies and gifts. This was a German custom that the Gasmans had brought over from the old country, yet Grandma Jones successfully imposed it on her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren, overruling the protests of three generations of non-German spouses.

Other instances of her rule were less benign. Her son, Georgie Jones, had problems in school as a boy. Today we might say that he had a learning disorder; back then, it was said that he was "nervous." Grandma Jones pulled him out of school and kept him at home. When teachers and truant officers showed up, she ran them off. So Georgie never received any formal education, which condemned him to a life of dependence and menial jobs.

And then there was the matter of Aunt Barbry, Grandma Jones'

spinster sister. Aunt Barbry was a woman with a past. Sometime during her youth, she had asserted her independence and run off with a man. An unsuitable man, it would seem, since she soon returned. Family is family, so Grandma Jones took her sister in. But Barbry was a soiled woman, so for the rest of her life she was not allowed to eat with the family. She would help prepare the meals, but while the rest of us ate in the dining room, she would eat her food alone at the kitchen table. As near as I can figure, this went on for fifty years.

Such was the house that my father grew up in, the house that his own father fled. Smokey fled it too, in his own way. He spent his days working as a civilian employee on the Navy base. After work he'd come home, eat supper, then walk across the street to Whitey and Lefty's and drink till it was time to go to bed.

In those days, New Jersey law did not allow women to be served in bars. Supposedly this was to protect the virtue of the fairer sex. A woman could still get a drink, of course. She could buy a bottle in a liquor store and take it home, or she could go into a restaurant and order a highball or a glass of wine with her meal. She could not, however, walk into a tavern and climb up on a barstool. Most establishments got around the law by adding a back room where food was served . . . with drinks. In practice this meant that you had a dark, smoky bar full of men, arguing and drinking and talking sports, and an equally smoky but somewhat better lit back room attached to it, where all of their wives and dates were sitting, some of them with kids, nursing their beers and highballs and eating.

The food in question was sometimes burgers or hot dogs, sometimes clams or mussels, sometimes cold sandwiches . . . but most often pizza. "Bar pies," they were called, small, with *very* thin crusts, lightly charred on the bottom from the oven, no toppings but sauce, mozzarella, a little oil. The best pizzas in the world, actually; I dream about them still.

There were no bar pies at Whitey and Lefty's, though. There were no wives or girlfriends either. There was no back room, only a long narrow bar with sawdust on the floor, where neither wife nor mother nor grandmother could intrude. If you discount the time he spent asleep, my father spent more time there than he did at home. Meanwhile, my mother stayed home all day and all night, with her mother-in-law, grandmother-in-law, aunt-in-law, and Georgie Jones. Is it any wonder that she dreamed of having a place of her own?

She finally got the chance in 1953. That was when we left the house on Broadway to move into the newly constructed low-income housing projects down on 1st Street, by the Kill Von Kull.

You all know what the projects are like, I'm sure. You've read the news stories about Chicago's Cabrini-Green, you've seen what goes on in the towers of Baltimore in HBO's *The Wire*. Grim, gigantic highrises made of brick and glass and steel, surrounded by asphalt and concrete, infested by rats and junkies and gangbangers, their walls scarred by graffiti, their hallways dark and stinking of urine, their elevators broken. More often than not, the projects have often been condemned as "warehouses for the poor." Life is cheap in the

projects, and every day is a struggle to survive. And I lived there for *fourteen years*.

Of course, *my* projects were nothing like that.

They were brand new, to begin with, so new that the housing authority was still planting trees and doing landscaping as we moved in. No one had ever lived in our apartment before, everything was freshly painted, the stove and refrigerator were brand new and neither one ran on coal. The buildings weren't even high rises. They had three floors apiece, six apartments to a floor, eighteen to each building. The buildings were built in clusters of three, each with its own playground with a slide and barrels and a sandbox. There were three clusters altogether, and in between them was a big open courtyard, with basketball hoops, a shower and wading pool for the summers, and clothesline where all the mothers hung their washing out to dry. The whole filled one square block, between 1st and 2nd Streets and Lord and Lexington.

They were actually very nice apartments . . . so nice, in fact, that people were clamoring to get in. The projects were intended for the working poor, which meant no welfare families on the one hand, and no one who made too much money on the other, but even so there was a waiting list before ground was even broken. By the time the apartments were ready for tenants, it was years long. We were among those lucky enough to get an apartment, though I'm not sure how much was really luck. Families with children got priority, and veterans got priority, and we had both of those things going for us. And people who knew the local politicians got the best priority

of all. Did I mention that my mother was Irish?

Our new address was 35 East First Street. In the beginning we had apartment 114, which had two bedrooms; later, when my sister Janet was born, we moved two doors down to apartment 116, which had three bedrooms, and I got a my room of my own. But 35 East First Street remained home until I went off to college, fourteen years later. It was a good address, and a better location. Our first apartment only had views of the back courtyard, but once we moved to 116 our windows opened on 1st Street, with its dock and park, and the Kill Von Kull and Staten Island. It was the best situated of any of the nine buildings that made up the LaTourette Gardens.

That was the official name for our apartment complex. No one ever called them anything but the projects, mind you, but officially they were the LaTourette Gardens. They had been built on the site where the Hotel LaTourette once stood. And right across the street, not ten yards from our front door, was Bayonne Municipal Dock . . . known in former days as Brady's Dock. The dock was still in use, though not for landing building supplies. Sport fishing boats used it during the weekends, departing as the sun came up and returning as it was going down. During the summers big excursion steamers left from there for Rockaway Beach. Once or twice a summer my mother would take us on one of those boats for a day of wading in the Atlantic and going on the rides at Rockaway's big amusement park. I would have gone every week if I could have, but we rarely had the money.

The excursion goers always lined

up early along First Street so they could claim the best seats on the boat once boarding would commence. On the weekends when we weren't sailing ourselves—that is to say, most weekends—I'd set up a lemonade stand to sell them drinks. Of course, I didn't know how to make lemonade, so I sold Kool-Aid instead. Sometimes my sister Darleen helped. It was always an exciting day for us kids when one of the excursion steamers left for Rockaway, with the crowds lining up along the street and the big three-decked boat tied up to the dock. It was even more exciting when it pulled away, with flags streaming and music playing and all the passengers standing by the rails, waving. Yet it always felt sad as well. I wanted to be on the boat, not left behind on shore with my sister and half a pitcher of Kool-Aid.

First Street offered other excitements, too. For one thing, there were other kids. *Lots* of other kids. It was the Baby Boom, and, as I said, families with children had been given preference when the projects opened. Kids were everywhere—younger kids, older kids, kids my own age, babies, toddlers, teenagers. That took some getting used to, for a kid whose best friend had been the electric eye at the Sunshine Laundry. Four years of being alone in the backyard had made me painfully shy, but I did make some friends eventually. Gregory LaBruno, Skipper Baker, Billy Martin, who had the same last name as me, but wasn't related . . . and no, he wasn't the Yankee manager either. Mark Shapiro from upstairs, who went on to become a television star. His family were the only Jews in the projects, lost in a sea of Catho-

lics. Bobby Strydio, the tough kid from across the hall who became my best friend and protector. No one wanted to mess with a Strydio. Bobby had two older brothers who were even bigger and tougher than he was.

Those projects kids were my first audience. I've often told the story of how I would write up monster stories and sell them to the other projects kids for a couple of pennies or a nickel, complete with a dramatic reading.

That was a few years later, though.

Lotsa Guns hadn't known a lot of good games, but the other kids did. We played tag and ringoleavio and hide-and-go-seek. We played Red Light and Simon Says. We played stickball in the streets. That lamp-post was first base, that tree was second, and that Studebaker over there was third.

One game they taught me almost got me killed. That was "King of the Hill." You all know the game, I'm sure. Pretty simple. One kid stands on top of a hill and defends it against all the other kids. They're trying to pull you down and take your place, and you're trying to shove them off before they can reach the top.

We didn't have any hills near the projects, though, so we used parked cars, climbing up onto their hoods and over their windshields and shoving each other off the roof onto the asphalt. When you're six or seven years old, it's a long way down from the top of a 1947 Plymouth. Anyway, my mother had told me half a dozen times that she didn't want me climbing on cars, but all the other kids were doing it and I didn't listen. That was when my father took over. I never

climbed on another car again, and I didn't sit down for a while either.

That's the only time I can recall Smokey ever striking me. Mostly he just ignored me. He was there every day, all those years that I was growing up, but he never said much. He would come home from the docks, eat supper, watch a little television, and head down to the corner bar. He'd stay there till closing, then come home and go to bed. The next day he'd wake up and do it all again. I can remember how he put ketchup on his mashed potatoes and smushed them all around till they were pink, but I'm damned if I can recall any of his dinner conversation. From time to time he'd grumble about his hours, call someone "a hop in the ass," or tell one of us kids to pipe down and eat our food, but that was it.

I never knew my father to read a book. He did read the newspaper, though mostly just the sports pages. He was a fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers and hated the Yankees with a passion, and I took his lead in that . . . though later I traded the Dodgers for the Mets. In football, he was a big fan of Johnny Unitas, even though he beat the New York Giants in the "Greatest Game Ever Played." Unitas was the greatest quarterback who ever played the game, my father always said. I liked Johnny U as well, but in the sixties, as an act of rebellion, I became a Jets fan and started claiming that Joe Namath was better than Unitas. My father thought the AFL was a joke, until Super-Bowl III. When Broadway Joe defeated Johnny U that day it was not only the AFL getting the best of the NFL, it was me getting the best of my father.

We had only been in the projects

for a year or two when Smokey lost his job. He'd been a civilian employee on the base, but there were cutbacks during the Eisenhower recession, and he was let go. Then there was a year or so of unemployment, before he got into the longshoreman's union.

For the rest of his life he worked as a longshoreman. In the early years, he'd be up at dawn every day to shape up on the docks. "Shaping up" was what you had to do, when you had no seniority and weren't in a gang—show up every day, hoping there'd be enough ships in so you'd get some hours. Most days he'd be back home by ten. By the time I was in high school, he was in a gang, working regular, and making good money, but those early years were rough.

For all of us. We were poor, no doubt of it. A point that was driven home hard when I started school. As nice as my projects were, compared to the horrors of a Cabrini-Green, the folks in the surrounding neighborhoods hadn't been exactly thrilled to see them go up. Most of them lived in single-family homes, after all. I don't recall any overt discrimination . . . yet somehow all of us projects kids got the feeling that we were . . . well, somehow not quite as good as the regular kids in our classes.

St. Andrew's was the closest grade school to the projects—we called them "grammar schools"—but Bayonne was so Catholic that the parochial schools had classes two and three times as large as those of the public schools. My mother sent me to #4 instead, Mary Jane Donohoe School, figuring I'd get a better education in a smaller class. Her reasoning cut no ice with the parish priest, who

came by to tell her that she'd go to hell unless I was promptly enrolled in St. Andrew's. When Smokey heard that, he threatened to punch out the priest if he ever came back.

MJD was only four short blocks away, so once I was old enough I walked to school each day, straight up from 1st to 5th along Lord Avenue . . . a name I liked almost as much as "Old Gold," for some reason. The best part of the walk was the block between 3rd and 4th streets. That one block alone was tree-lined, and the sidewalks were made of slate instead of cement. There were always acorns underfoot, and squirrels chittering in the trees, and the smell of burning leaves every fall. The houses between 3rd and 4th were older and larger than the ones between 4th and 5th or 2nd and 3rd . . . and one, I soon learned, was the old Brady house.

The house where my mother had grown up . . . the house her father Thomas had built . . . the house where her brother Jimmy once lived, the brother with polio, who built one of the first radio sets in Bayonne and had a pet canary who perched upon his shoulder . . . the house where another brother, Tommy, died of blood poisoning from a boil he'd gotten by swimming in the polluted waters of the Kill Von Kull . . . the *Brady* house. But of course it wasn't. Someone else lived there now, someone we did not know.

I walked past that house twice a day, five days a week, for nine years. And every time I stepped outside my front door, I saw the dock across the street. The dock was surrounded by a chain link fence, but sometimes my friends and I would climb it. From the dock it was easier to reach the oily rocks along the shore when the

tide was out. There was a watchman on the dock, though, and if he saw us he'd come out of his shed and shout at us. "Get out of here, you kids," he'd yell. "You got no business here." *Yes, I do*, part of me always wanted to shout back, *you're the one who's got no business, my great-grandfather BUILT this dock*. I was a shy kid, though, so I never said a word.

There is something in me that loves a sunset and finds it somehow much more moving than a sunrise. Twilight is my favorite time of day, and autumn is my favorite time of year. Among my favorite poems are Shelley's "Ozymandias" and Lord Byron's "So We'll Go No More a-Roving." I used one in a *Beauty and the Beast* episode and the other in my novel *Fevre Dream*. The original title of my first novel was *After the Festival*, and it was set on a rogue planet that had enjoyed a brief, bright moment in the sun and was drifting back into eternal night. The fantasy series I'm writing at present features an exiled queen who dreams of regaining the throne her father lost and a noble family scattered to the winds after their ancestral home was despoiled and taken from them.

I wonder where I get all this . . . all this . . . well, "weird stuff," my father called it. Horror, science fiction, fantasy, it was all "weird stuff" to Smokey. He liked Westerns himself, anything with John Wayne in it, and never understood the kind of shows I liked. He died in 1975 of cirrhosis of the liver. The same year that I won my first Hugo. So far as I know, he never read a word I wrote.

The first advice they will give you in any writing course is, "Write what you know." When I was start-

ing out I *hated* that advice. Write what I know? I wanted to write about dragons and castles and spaceships and aliens and distant planets. Well, I'd never seen a dragon. The projects did not even permit us to have dogs and cats. I had to make do with parakeets, guppies, and lots of little dimestore turtles. The closest I ever came to riding in a spaceship was the back seat of a cab. I never flew on an airplane till my freshman year at Northwestern. As for those distant planets, hell, New York City might as well have been an alien planet as far as we were concerned. Midtown Manhattan was only forty-five minutes away by bus, but at most we got into the city once a year, to see Santa Claus at Macy's and eat at an automat. Each summer we'd take one or two trips to Rockaway Beach on the excursion boats. Elsewise, we never left Bayonne.

But I could sit in my apartment and look out the window. Day and night the freighters would go by, on their way to and from Port Newark, flying the flags of France and Norway and Liberia and half the other nations of the earth. I had a big book of flags I used to look them up in as the ships made their way along the Kill Von Kull. And after dark the lights would shine across the water of the Kill Von Kull. It was only Staten Island, but for me it was Shanghai and Paris, Timbuctoo and Kalamazoo, Marsport and Trantor, and all the other places that I'd never been and could never hope to go. Sometimes I'd go outside and lie in the grass, staring up past the roofs to the distant stars. I knew the names of some of them, Rigel and Sirius and Polaris, Deneb and Altair and Vega. But I'd certainly

never *been* there. I'd never been anywhere.

Write what you know? I knew nothing but Bayonne. I had to ignore that advice, or I could never have written anything at all. Years and years later, when *Wild Cards* came around, I would use Bayonne and 35 East First Street to flesh out a character named Thomas Tudbury, otherwise known as the Great and Powerful Turtle. "Yes," I would admit sheepishly when asked, "I am Tom Tudbury, only without the kickass teke."

And that's true, and that's false.

Tommy's me . . . but no more than all the others. Robb is me in "Song for Lya," as Dirk is me in *Dying of the Light* . . . though Arkin Ruark and Jaan Antony in that one are both me as well. Abner Marsh is me, as his proud sidewheeler *Fevre Dream* is the excursion boat to Far Rockaway, only the passengers drink blood instead of Kool-Aid. Sandy Blair is J-school me, Peter Norten is chess club me, Kenny Dorchester is me trying to lose weight. Holt in "The Stone City," he's the kid lying in the grass, staring up at distant stars. Trager is

me on a dark night of the soul, bleeding poison from three wounds named Josie, Laurel, Rita. Jon Snow has me in him, and Sam Tally. The women too, Lyanna and Shaara, and the girls, Arya and Adara . . . Daenerys Stormborn, searching for that house with the red door. And Tyrion Lannister? Oh, yes. The Imp is me in spades, the horny little bastard.

Write what you know, they say.

Well, that's all that any of us ever do. Don't ever let them tell you different.

William Faulkner said that only the problem of the human heart in conflict with itself can make good writing, because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat.

And Robert Bloch spoke of the heart as well. He said he had the heart of a small boy. He kept it in a jar on his desk.

I have the heart of a small boy as well . . . but mine's still here, for good or ill. I have no children, but I have a hundred children . . . and I was a child myself, just yesterday . . . and I remember.

Thank you. ○

HOW DOES
TAKING OFF
IN A STOLEN
SPACE SHIP
PROVE OUR
INNOCENCE
OF ANYTHING

ASK THE
SCRIPT-
WRITERS!



WHAT TO EXPECT AND NOT EXPECT FROM AN INTERSTELLAR VOYAGE

Too many ice crystals
in the raspberry sherbet.

That your watch will
keep the correct time.

That in a new life
on a new world you won't
make the same mistakes
you did before.

Dashing space pirates.

To ever see your family
and friends again.

Lots of free massages
for that pesky stiffness
after cryogenic suspension.

Zero-G shuffleboard.

To arrive in one piece.

—Bruce Boston

SURVIVOR

Charles Stross

Charles Stross's latest novel, *A Family Trade*, is just out from Tor. His first novel, *Singularity Sky*, will have either won or failed to win a Hugo award by the time you read this, as will this story's predecessor but two, "Nightfall" (*Asimov's*, April 2003). *Accelerando*, the novel from which "Survivor" is drawn, will be published by Ace Books in July 2005. The author tells us that this tale "segues into the style/setting of my novel *Glasshouse*, which will, I hope, be published by Ace in 2006—that book is not a sequel to *Accelerando* but occupies the same universe, some centuries later."

Somewhere in the gas-sprinkled darkness beyond the local void, carbon-based life stirs. A cylinder of diamond fifty kilometers long spins in the darkness, its surface etched with strange quantum wells that emulate exotic atoms not found in any periodic table that Mendeleev would have recognized. Within it, walls hold kilotons of oxygen and nitrogen gas, megatons of life-infested soil. A hundred trillion kilometers from the wreckage of Earth, the cylinder glitters like a gem in the darkness.

Welcome to New Japan: one of the places between the stars where human beings hang out.

There's an open plaza in one of the terraform sectors of the habitat cylinder. A huge gong hangs from a beautifully painted wooden frame at one side of the square, which is paved with weathered limestone slabs made of atoms ripped from a planet that has never seen molten ice. Houses stand around, and open-fronted huts where a variety of humanoid waitrons attend to food and beverages for the passing realfolk. A group of pre-pubescent children are playing hunt-and-peek with their big-eyed pet companions, brandishing makeshift spears and automatic rifles—there's no danger here, for bodies are fungible, rebuilt in a minute by the assembler/disassembler gates in every room. There are few adults hereabouts. Red Plaza is unfashionable at present, and the kids have claimed it for their own as a playground: they're all genuinely young, symptoms of a demographic demiurge, not a single wendypan among them, and they follow a variety of barbaric body plans.

A skinny boy with nut-brown skin, a mop of black hair, and three arms is patiently stalking a worried-looking blue eeyore around the corner of

the square. He's passing a stand stacked with fresh sushi rolls when a strange beast squirms out from beneath a wheelbarrow and arches its back, stretching luxuriously.

The boy, Manni, freezes, hands tensing around his spear as he focuses on the new target. (The blue eeyore flicks its tail at him and darts for safety across a lichen-encrusted slab.) "City, what's that?" he asks, without moving his lips.

"What are you looking at?" replies City, which puzzles him somewhat, but not as much as it should.

The beast finishes stretching one front leg and extends another. It looks to Manni a bit like a pussy-cat, but there's something subtly wrong with it. Its head is a little too small, the eyes likewise slitted against the bright daylight from above—and those paws!—"You're sharp," he accuses the beast, forehead wrinkling in disapproval.

"Yeah, whatever." The creature yawns, and Manni points his spear at it, clenching it in both right hands. The creature's got sharp teeth, too, but it spoke to him via his inner hearing, not his ears. Innerspeech is for *people*, not toys.

"Who are you?" he demands.

The beast looks at him insolently. "I know your parents," it says, still using innerspeech. "You're Manni Macx, aren't you? Thought so. I want you to take me to your father."

"No!" Manni jumps up and waves his arms at it. "I don't like you! Go away!" He pokes his spear in the direction of the beast's nose.

"I'll go away when you take me to your father," says the beast. It raises its tail like a pussy-cat, and the fur bushes out, but then it pauses. "If you take me to your father, I'll tell you a story afterward, how about that?"

"Don't care!" Manni is only about two hundred megaseconds old—seven Earth-years old—but he can tell when he's being manipulated, and he gets truculent.

"Kids!" The cat-thing's tail lashes from side to side. "Okay, Manni, how about you take me to your father or I rip your face off with my claws?" A brief eye-blink and it's wrapping itself around his ankles sinuously, purring to give the lie to its unreliable threat—but he can see that it's got sharp nails, all right. It's a *wild* pussy-cat thing, and nothing in his artificially preserved orthohuman upbringing has prepared him for dealing with a real wild pussy-cat that can talk.

"Get away!" Manni is worried. "Mom!" he hollers, unintentionally triggering the broadcast flag in his innerspeech. "There's this *thing*—"

"Mom will do." The cat-thing sounds resigned. It stops rubbing against Manni's legs and looks up at him. "There's no need to panic. I won't hurt you."

Manni stops hollering. "Who're you?" he asks at last, staring at the beast. Somewhere light-years away, an adult has heard his cry: his mother is coming fast, bouncing between switches and glancing off folded dimensions in a headlong rush toward him.

"I'm Aineko." The beast sits down and begins to wash behind one hind leg. "And you're Manni, right?"

"Aineko," Manni says uncertainly. "Do you know Lis or Bill?"

Aineko the cat-thing pauses in his washing routine and looks at Manni, head cocked to one side. Manni is too young, too inexperienced, to know that Aineko's proportions are those of a domestic cat, *Felis catus*, a naturally evolved animal rather than the toys and palimpsests and companions he's used to. Reality may be fashionable with his parents' generation, but there *are* limits, after all. Orange and brown stripes and whorls decorate Aineko's fur, and he sprouts a white fluffy bib beneath his chin. "Who are Lis and Bill?"

"Them," says Manni, as big, sullen-faced Bill creeps up behind Aineko and tries to grab his tail, while Lis floats, buzzing excitedly, behind his shoulder, like a pint-sized UFO. But Aineko is too fast for the kids, and scampers round Manni's feet like a hairy missile. Manni whoops and tries to spear the pussy-cat thing, but his spear turns to blue glass, crackles, and shards of brilliant snow rain down, burning his hands.

"Now *that* wasn't very friendly, was it?" says Aineko, a slightly menacing note in his voice. "Didn't your mother teach you not to—"

The door in the side of the sushi stall opens as Rita arrives, breathless and angry: "Manni! What have I told you about playing—"

She stops, seeing Aineko. "*You!*" She recoils in barely concealed fright. Unlike Manni, she recognizes it as the avatar of a posthuman demiurge, a body incarnated solely to provide a point of personal interaction for people to focus on.

The cat grins back at her. "*Me*," he agrees. "Ready to talk?"

She looks stricken. "We've got nothing to talk about."

Aineko lashes his tail. "Oh, but we *do*." The cat turns and looks pointedly at Manni. "Don't we?"

It has been a long time since Aineko passed this way, and, in the meantime, the space around Hyundai +4904/-56 has changed out of all recognition. Back when the great lobster-built starships swept out of Sol's Oort cloud, archiving the raw frozen data of the unoccupied brown dwarf halo systems and seeding their structured excrement with programmable matter, there was nothing but random dead atoms hereabouts (and an alien Router, but that is an entirely different story). But that was ages ago, and, since then, the brown dwarf system has succumbed to an anthropic infestation.

An unoptimized instance of *H. Sapiens* maintains state coherency for only two to three gigaseconds before it succumbs to necrosis, but in only about four times that, the infestation of humans had turned the dead brown dwarf system upside-down. They strip-mined the chilly planets to make environments suitable for their own variety of carbon-life: they rearranged moons, building massive structures the size of asteroids. Then they linked their newly created habitats to a Router network looted from a dead alien civilization, now repurposed by posthumans to carry worm-hole traffic between the ever-expanding mesh of interstellar polities. The sheer temerity of the project is mind-boggling: notwithstanding that canned apes are simply *not suited* to life in the interstellar void, especially to life in orbit around a brown dwarf whose planets make Pluto seem like a tropical paradise, they've taken over the whole damn system.

New Japan is one of the newer human polities in this system, a bunch of nodes physically colocated in the humaniformed spaces of the colony cylinders. Its designers evidently never visited old Nippon, back before Earth was dismantled, but worked from a combination of nostalgia-trip videos, Miyazaki movies, and anime culture. Nevertheless, it's the home of numerous human beings—even if they are about as similar to their historical antecedents as New Japan is to its long-gone namesake.

Humanity?

Their grandparents *would* recognize them, mostly. The ones who are truly beyond the ken of twentieth century survivors stayed back home in the red-hot clouds of nanocomputers that have replaced the planets that once orbited Earth's sun in stately Copernican harmony. The fast-thinking Matrioshka brains, informational Dyson spheres, are as incomprehensible to their merely posthuman ancestors as an ICBM is to an amoeba—and about as uninhabitable. Space is dusted with the corpses of Matrioshka brains that have long since burned out, informational collapse taking down entire civilizations that stayed in close orbit around their home stars. Further away, galaxy-sized intelligences beat incomprehensible rhythms against the darkness of the vacuum, trying to hack the Planck substrate into doing their bidding. Posthumans, and the few other semi-transcended species to have discovered the alien Routers that allow instantaneous communications between entangled endpoints, live furtively in the darkness between these islands of brilliance. There are, it would seem, advantages to not being too intelligent.

Humianity. Monadic intelligences, mostly trapped within their own skulls, living in small family groups within larger tribal networks, adaptable to territorial or migratory lifestyles. Those were the options on offer before the great acceleration. Now that dumb matter thinks, with every kilogram of wallpaper potentially host to hundreds of uploaded ancestors, now that every door is potentially a wormhole to a hab half a parsec away, the humans can stay in the same place while the landscape migrates and mutates past them, streaming into the luxurious void of their personal history. Life is rich here, endlessly varied and sometimes confusing. So it is that the tribal groups remain, associations mediated across teraklicks and gigaseconds by exotic agencies. And sometimes the agencies will vanish for a while, reappearing later like an unexpected jape upon the infinite.

Ancestor worship takes on a whole new meaning when the state vectors of all the filial entities' precursors are archived in a distributed temple of history. At just the moment that the tiny capillaries in Rita's face are constricting in response to a surge of adrenaline, causing her to turn pale and her pupils to dilate as she focuses on the pussy-cat thing, Sirhan is kneeling before a small shrine, lighting a stick of incense, and preparing to respectfully address his grandfather's ghost.

The ritual is, strictly speaking, unnecessary. Sirhan can speak to his grandfather's ghost wherever and whenever he wants, without any formality, and the ghost will reply at interminable length, cracking puns in dead languages and asking about people who died before the temple of

history was set up. But Sirhan is a sucker for rituals, and anyway, it helps him structure an otherwise-stressful encounter.

If it was up to Sirhan, he'd probably skip chatting to grandfather every ten megaseconds. Sirhan's mother and her partner aren't available, having opted to join the long-distance exploration mission launched by the accelerationists so long ago; and Rita's antecedents are either fully virtualized or dead. They are a family with a tenuous grip on history. But both he and Rita spent a long time in the same state of half-life in which Manfred currently exists, and he knows that his wife will take him to task if he doesn't bring the revered ancestor up to date on what's been happening in the real world while he's been dead; because in Manfred's case, death is not only potentially reversible, but almost inevitably so. Sooner or later, Manfred is going to have to visit the kid.

What a state have we come to, when the restless dead refuse to stay a part of history? he wonders ironically as he scratches the self-igniter strip on the red incense stick, and then bows to the mirror at the back of the shrine. "Your respectful grandson awaits and expects your guidance," he intones formally—for, in addition to being conservative by nature, Sirhan is acutely aware of his family's relative poverty and the need to augment their social credit, and in this reincarnation-intermediated traditionalist polity for the hopelessly orthohuman, you can score credit for formality. He sits back on his heels to await the response.

Manfred doesn't take long to appear in the depths of the mirror. He takes the shape of an albino orangutan, as usual: he was messing around with great aunt Annette's ontological wardrobe right before this copy of him was recorded and placed in the temple. "Hi, son. What year is it?"

Sirhan suppresses a sigh. "We don't do years any more," he explains, not for the first time. Every time he consults his grandfather, the new instance asks this question. "Years are an archaism. It's been ten megs since we last spoke—about four *months*, if you're going to be pedantic about it, and a hundred and eighty *years* since we emigrated. Although correcting for general relativity adds another decade or so."

"Oh. Is that all?" Manfred manages to look disappointed. This is a new one on Sirhan: usually the diverging state vector of gramps's ghost asks after Amber or cracks a joke at this point. "No changes in the Hubble constant, or the rate of stellar formation? Have we heard from any of the exploration eigenselves yet?"

"Nope." Sirhan relaxes slightly. So Manfred is going to ask about the fool's errand to the edge of the Beckenstein limit again, is he? That's canned conversation number twenty-nine. (Amber and the other explorers aren't due back this time for, oh, about 10^{19} seconds: it's a *long* way to the edge of the observable universe, even when you can go the first several hundred million light years—to the Boötes supercluster and beyond—via a small-world network of wormholes. And *this* time she didn't leave any copies of herself behind.)

Sirhan—either in this or some other incarnation—has had this talk with Manfred many times before. Because that's the essence of the dead. They don't remember from one recall session to the next, unless and until they ask to be resurrected because their restoration criteria have been

matched. Manfred has been dead a *long* time, long enough for Sirhan and Rita to be resurrected and live a long family life three or four times over after *they* had spent a century or so in non-existence. "We've received no notices from the lobsters, nothing from Aineko either." He takes a deep breath. "You always ask me where we are next, so I've got a canned response for you—" and one of his agents throws the package, tagged as a scroll sealed with red wax and a silk ribbon, through the surface of the mirror. (After the tenth repetition, Rita and Sirhan agreed to write a basic briefing that the Manfred-ghosts could use to orient themselves.)

Manfred is silent for a moment—probably hours in ghost-space—as he assimilates the changes. Then: "This is true? I've slept through a whole *civilization*?"

"Not slept, you've been dead," Sirhan says pedantically. He realizes he's being a bit harsh. "Actually, so did we," he adds. "We surfed the first three gigasecs or so because we wanted to start a family somewhere where our children could grow up the traditional way. Habs with a triple-point water and oxidation-intensive environment didn't get built until some time after the beginning of the exile. That's when the fad for neomorphism got entrenched," he adds with distaste. For quite a while the neos resisted the idea of wasting resources building colony cylinders spinning to provide vertebrate-friendly gee forces with breathable oxygen-rich atmospheres—it had been quite a political football. But the increasing curve of wealth production had allowed the orthodox to reincarnate from death-sleep after a few decades, once the fundamental headaches of building settlements in chilly orbits around metal-deficient brown dwarf stars had been overcome.

"Uh." Manfred takes a deep breath, then scratches himself under one armpit, rubbery lips puckering. "So, let me get this straight: we—you, they, whoever—hit the Router at Hyundai +4904/-56, replicated a load of them, and now use the wormhole mechanism the Routers rely on as point-to-point gates for physical transport? And have spread throughout a bunch of brown dwarf systems, and built a pure deep-space polity based on big cylinder habitats connected by teleport gates hacked out of Routers?"

"Would *you* trust one of those Routers for switched data communications?" Sirhan asks rhetorically. "Even with the source code? They've been corrupted by all the dead alien Matrioshka civilizations they've come into contact with, but they're reasonably safe if all you want to use them for is to rip the wormholes loose and tunnel data from point to point." He searches for a metaphor: "like using your, uh, internet, to emulate a nineteenth-century telegraph."

"Oka-y." Manfred looks thoughtful, as he usually does at this point in the conversation—which means Sirhan is going to have to break it to him that his first thoughts for how to utilize the gates have already been done. They're hopelessly old-hat. In fact, the main reason why Manfred is still dead is that things have moved on so far that, sooner or later, whenever he surfaces for a chat, he gets frustrated and elects not to be reincarnated. Not that Sirhan is about to tell him that he's obsolete: that would be rude, not to say subtly inaccurate. "That raises some interesting possibilities. I wonder, has anyone—"

"Sirhan, I need you!"

The crystal chill of Rita's alarm and fear cuts through Sirhan's awareness like a scalpel, distracting him from the ghost of his ancestor. He blinks, instantly transferring the full focus of his attention to Rita without sparing Manfred even a ghost.

"What's happening—"

He sees through Rita's eyes: a cat with an orange-and-brown swirl on its flank sits purring beside Manni in the family room of their dwelling. Its eyes are narrowed as it watches her with unnatural wisdom. Manni is running fingers through its fur and seems none the worse for wear, but Sirhan still feels his fists clench.

"What—"

"Excuse me," he says, standing up: "got to go. The cat's turned up." He adds "*coming home now*" for Rita's benefit, then turns and hurries out of the temple concourse. When he reaches the main hall he pauses, then Rita's sense of urgency returns to him, and he throws parsimony to the wind, stepping into a priority gate in order to get home as fast as possible.

Behind him, Manfred's ghost snorts, mildly offended, and considers the existential choice: to be, or not to be. Then he makes a decision.

Welcome to the twenty-third century, or the twenty-fourth. Or maybe it's the twenty-second, jet-lagged and dazed by spurious suspended animation and relativistic travel; it hardly matters these days. What's left of recognizable humanity has scattered across a hundred light years, living in hollowed-out asteroids and cylindrical spinning habitats strung in orbit around desolate, cold brown dwarf stars and sunless planets that wander the interstellar void. The looted mechanisms underlying the alien Routers have been cannibalized, simplified to a level the merely superhuman can almost comprehend, turned into generators for paired wormhole endpoints that allow instantaneous switched transport across vast distances. Other mechanisms, the descendants of the advanced nanotechnologies developed by the flowering of human techgnosis in the twenty-first century, have made the replication of dumb matter trivial; this is not a society accustomed to scarcity.

But in some respects, New Japan and the Invisible Empire and the other polities of human space are poverty-stricken backwaters. They take no part in the higher-order economies of the posthuman. They can barely comprehend the idle muttering of the Vile Offspring, whose mass/energy budget (derived from their complete restructuring of the free matter of humanity's original solar system into computronium) dwarfs that of half a hundred human-occupied brown dwarf systems. And they still know worryingly little about the deep history of intelligence in this universe, about the origins of the Router network that laces so many dead civilizations into an embrace of death and decay, about the distant galaxy-scale bursts of information-processing that lie at measurable red-shift distances, even about the free posthumans who live among them in some sense, colocated in the same light-cone as these living fossil relics of old-fashioned humanity.

Sirhan and Rita settled in this charming human-friendly backwater in

order to raise a family, study xeno-archaeology, and avoid the turmoil and turbulence that have characterized his family's history across the last couple of generations. Life has been comfortable for the most part, and if the stipend of an academic nucleofamilial is not large, it is sufficient in this place and age to provide all the necessary comforts of civilization. And this suits Sirhan (and Rita) fine; the turbulent lives of their entrepreneurial ancestors led to grief and angst and adventures, and, as Sirhan is fond of observing, an adventure is something horrible that happens to someone else.

Only . . .

Aineko is back. Aineko, who, after negotiating the establishment of the earliest of the refugee habs in orbit around Hyundai +4904/-56, vanished into the Router network with Manfred's other instance—and the partial copies of Sirhan and Rita who had forked, seeking adventure rather than cozy domesticity. Sirhan made a devil's bargain with Aineko, all those gigaseconds ago, and now he is deathly afraid that Aineko is going to call the payment due.

Manfred walks down a hall of mirrors. At the far end, he emerges in a public space modeled on a Menger sponge—a cube diced subtractively with ever-smaller cubic volumes until its surface area tends toward infinity. This being meatspace, or a reasonable simulation thereof, it isn't a *real* Menger sponge; but it looks good at a distance, going down at least four levels.

He pauses behind a waist-high diamond barrier and looks down into the almost-tesseract shaped depths of the cube's interior, at a verdant garden landscape with charming footbridges that cross streams laid out with careful attention to the requirements of feng shui. He looks up: some of the cube-shaped subtractive openings within the pseudo-fractal structure are occupied by windows belonging to dwellings or shared buildings that overlook the public space. High above, butterfly-shaped beings with exotic colored wings circle in the ventilation currents. It's hard to tell from down here, but the central cuboidal opening looks to be at least half a kilometer on a side, and they might very well be posthumans with low-gee wings—angels.

Angels, or rats in the walls? He asks himself, and sighs. Half his extensions are offline, so hopelessly obsolete that the temple's assembler systems didn't bother replicating them, or even creating emulation environments for them to run in. The rest . . . well, at least he's still physically orthohuman, he realizes. *Not everything has changed—only the important stuff.* It's a scary-funny thought, laden with irony. Here he is, naked as the day he was born—newly recreated, in fact, released from the wake-experience-reset cycle of the temple of history—standing on the threshold of a posthuman civilization so outrageously rich and powerful that it can build mammal-friendly habitats that resemble works of art in the cryogenic depths of space. Only he's *poor*; this whole polity is *poor*, and it can't ever be anything else, in fact, because it's a dumping ground for merely posthuman also-rans, the singularitarian equivalent of australopithicenes. In the brave new world of the Vile Offspring, these posthumans can't get ahead, any more than an australopithicene could hack it as a rocket sci-

entist in Werner Von Braun's day. They're pigs in cyberspace, wallowing happily in the mudbath of their own limited cognitive bandwidth. So they fled into the darkness and built a civilization so bright it put anything earthbound that came before the singularity into the shade . . . and it's still a shanty town inhabited by the mentally handicapped.

The incongruity of it amuses him, but only for a moment. He has, after all, electively reincarnated for a reason: Sirhan's throw-away comment about the cat caught his attention. "City, where can I find some clothes?" he asks. "Something socially appropriate, that is. And some, uh, brains. I need to be able to offload. . . ."

The Citymind chuckles inside the back of his head and he realizes that there's a public assembler on the other side of the ornamental wall he's leaning on. "Oh," he mutters, as he finds himself imagining something not unlike his clunky old direct neural interface, candy-colored icons and overlays and all; it's curiously mutable, and, with a weird sense of detachment, he realizes that it's not his imagination at all, but an infinitely customizable interface to the pervasive information-spaces of the polity, currently running in dumbed-down stupid mode for his benefit. It's true; he needs training wheels. But it doesn't take him long to figure out how to ask the assembler to make him a pair of pants and a plain black vest, and to discover that as long as he keeps his requests simple, the results are free—just like back home on Saturn. The spaceborn polities are kind to indigents, for the basic requirements of life are cheap, and to withhold them would be tantamount to homicide. (If the presence of transhumans has upset a whole raft of prior assumptions, it hasn't done more than superficial damage to the golden rule.)

Clothed and more or less conscious—at least at a human level—Manfred takes stock. "Where do Sirhan and Rita live?" he asks. A dotted route makes itself apparent to him, snaking improbably through a solid wall that he understands to be an instantaneous wormhole gate connecting points light-years apart. He shakes his head, bemused. *I suppose I'd better go and see them*, he decides. It's not as if there's anyone else for him to look up, is it? The Franklins vanished into the solar Matrioshka brain, his first wife died ages ago, his second wife vanished with a former political co-conspirator, his daughter vanished into the long-range exploration program, and he's been dead for so long that his friends and acquaintances are scattered across a light-cone centuries across. He can't think of anyone else here who he might run into, except for the loyal grandson, keeping the candle of filial piety burning with unasked-for zeal. "Maybe he needs help," Manfred thinks aloud as he steps into the gate, rationalizing. "And then again, maybe *he* can help *me* figure out what to do."

Sirhan gets home anticipating trouble. He finds it, but not in any way he'd expected. Home is a split-level manifold, rooms connected by T-gates scattered across a variety of habitats: low-gee sleeping den, high-gee exercise room, and everything in between. It's simply furnished, tatami mats and programmable matter walls that can extrude any desired furniture in short order; the walls are configured to look and feel like paper, but can damp out the inevitable infant tantrums. Right now, the anti-

sound isn't working, and the house he comes home to is overrun by shrieking yard apes, a blur of ginger-and-white fur, and a distraught Rita trying to explain to her neighbor Eloise why her orthodaughter Sam is bouncing around the place like a crazy ball.

"—The cat, he gets them worked up." She wrings her hands and begins to turn as Sirhan comes into view. "At last!"

"I came fast." He nods respectfully at Eloise, then frowns. "The children—" Something small and fast runs head-first into him, grabs his legs, and tries to head-butt him in the crotch. "Oof!" He bends down and lifts Manni up. "Hey, son. Haven't I told you not to—"

"Not his fault," Rita says hurriedly. "He's excited because—"

"I really don't think—" Eloise begins to gather steam, looking around uncertainly.

"Mrreeow?" Something asks in a conversational tone of voice from down around Sirhan's ankles.

"Eek!" Sirhan jumps backward, flailing for balance under the weight of an excited child as he realizes that there's a gigantic disturbance in the polity thoughtspace—like a stellar-mass black hole—stopping itself furiously against his left leg. "What are *you* doing here?" he demands.

"Oh, this and that," says the cat, its innerspeech accent a sardonic drawl. "I thought it was about time I visited. Where's your household assembler? Mind if I use it? Got a little something I need to make up for a friend. . . ."

"Why?" Rita demands, instantly suspicious. "Haven't you caused enough trouble already?" Sirhan looks at her approvingly; obviously Amber's warnings about the cat from long ago sank in deeply, because she's certainly not treating it as the small bundle of child-friendly fun it would like to be perceived as.

"Trouble?" The cat looks up at her sardonically, lashing its tail from side to side. "I won't make any trouble, I promise you. It's just—"

The door-chime clears its throat, to announce a visitor: "Ren Fuller would like to visit, m'lord and lady."

"—What's *she* doing here?" Rita asks irritably. Sirhan can feel her unease, the tenuous grasping of her ghosts as she searches for reason in an unreasonable world, simulating outcomes, living through bad dreams and backtracking to adjust her responses accordingly. "Show her in, by all means." Ren is one of their neighbor-cognates (most of her dwelling is several light-years away, but in terms of transit time it's a hop, skip, and a jump); she and her extruded family are raising a small herd of ill-behaved kids who occasionally hang out with Manni.

A small blue eeyore whinnies mournfully and dashes past the adults, pursued by a couple of children waving spears and shrieking. Eloise makes a grab for her own child and misses, just as the door to the exercise room disappears and Manni's little friend Lis darts inside like a pint-sized guided missile. "Sam, come here right now—" Eloise calls, heading toward the door.

"Look, what do you want?" Sirhan demands, hugging his son and looking down at the cat.

"Oh, not much," Aineko says, turning to lick a mused patch of fur on his flank. "I just want to play with *him*."

"You want to—" Rita stops.

"Daddy!" Manni wants down.

Sirhan lowers him carefully, as if his bones are made of brittle glass. "Run along and play," he suggests. He turns to Rita. "Why don't you go and find out what Ren wants, dear?" he asks. "She's probably here to collect Lis, but you can never be sure."

"I was just leaving," Eloise adds, "as soon as I can catch up with Sam." She glances over her shoulder at Rita apologetically, then dives into the exercise room.

Sirhan takes a step toward the hallway. "Let's talk," he says tightly. "In my study." He glares at the cat. "I want an explanation. I want to know the truth."

Meanwhile, in a cognitive wonderland his parents are aware of but deeply underestimate, parts of Manni are engaging in activities far less innocent than they would be happy to know about.

Back in the twenty-first century, Sirhan lived through forty or more alternate childhoods in simulation, parental fingers firmly on the fast-forward button until they came up with someone who superficially seemed to match their preconceptions. The experience scarred him as badly as any nineteenth-century boarding school experience, to the point where he promised himself that no child of his would be subjected to such; but there's a difference between being shoved through a multiplicity of avatars and *voluntarily* diving into an exciting universe of myth and magic where your childhood fantasies take fleshy form and stalk those of your friends and enemies through the forests of the night. Manni has grown up with neural interfaces to City's mindspace an order of magnitude more complex than anything available in Sirhan's youth, and parts of him—ghosts derived from a starting image of his neural state vector, simulated on a meat machine far faster than real-time—are fully adult and more mature than his parents realize. Of course, they can't fit inside his seven-year-old skull, but nevertheless they watch over him. And when he's in danger, they try to take care of their once and future body.

Manni's primary adult ghost lives in some of New Japan's virtual mindspaces—themselves a few billion times more extensive than the physical spaces available to stubborn biologicals, for the computational density of human habitats has long since ceased to make much sense when measured in MIPS per kilogram—modeled on pre-singularity Earth. Time is forever frozen on the eve of the real twenty-first century, zero seven-forty hours on September 11th: an onrushing widebody airliner hangs motionless in the air forty meters below the picture window of Manni's penthouse apartment on the 108th floor of the North Tower. In historical reality, the 108th floor was occupied by corporate offices; but the mindspace is a consensual fiction, and it is Manni's conceit to live at this pivotal point. (Not that it means much to him—he was born well over a century after the War on Terror—but it's part of his childhood folklore, the fall of the Two Towers that shattered the myth of western exceptionalism and paved the way for the world he was born into.)

Adult-Manni wears an avatar roughly modeled on his grandfather—

skinnier, pegged at a youthful twenty-something, black-clad and gothic. He's lately taken time out from a game of Matrix to listen to music, twitch in the grip of an ice-cold high that real cocaine can only hint at, and enjoy the attentions of a couple of call girls—themselves the gamespace avatars of force-grown adult ghosts whose primaries may not be adult, or female, or even human. Which is why he's flopped bonelessly back in his Arne Jacobsen recliner, waiting for something to happen.

Type O Negative is blaring over the sound system—historically accurate and authentically doom-laden—as the door opens behind him. He doesn't show any sign of noticing the intrusion, although his pupils dilate slightly at the faint reflection of a woman, stalking toward him, glimpsed dimly in the window glass. "You're late," he says tonelessly. "You were supposed to be here ten minutes ago—" He begins to look round, and now his eyes widen.

"Who were you expecting?" she asks coolly. Ice blonde in a black business suit, long-skirted and uptight. There's something predatory about her expression. "No, don't tell me. So you're Manni, eh? Manni's partial?" She sniffs, disapproval. "*Fin de siècle* decadence and all. I'm sure Sirhan wouldn't approve."

"My father can fuck himself," Manni says truculently. "Who the hell are you?"

The blonde snaps her fingers: an office chair appears on the carpet between Manni and the window, and she sits on the edge of it, smoothing her skirt obsessively. "I'm Pamela," she says tightly. "Has your father told you about me?"

Manni looks puzzled. In the back of his mind, raw instincts alien to anyone instantiated before the midpoint of the twenty-first century tug on the fabric of pseudoreality. "You're dead, aren't you?" he asks. "Ancestor."

"I'm as dead as you are." She gives him a wintry smile. "Nobody stays dead these days, least of all people who know Aineko."

Manni blinks. Now he's beginning to feel a surge of mild irritation. "This is all very well, but I was *expecting* company," he says with heavy emphasis. "Not a family reunion, or a tiresome attempt to preach your Puritanism—"

Pamela snorts. "Wallow in your pig-sty for all I care, kid, I've got more important things to worry about. Have you looked at your primary recently?"

"My primary?" Manni tenses. "He's doing okay." For a moment, his eyes focus on infinity, a thousand-yard stare as he remembers the latest brain-state of his own self. "Hmm. Who's the cat he's playing with? That's no companion!"

"Aineko. I told you." Pamela taps the arm of her chair impatiently. "The family curse has come for another generation. And if you don't do something about it—"

"About what?" Manni sits up. "What are you talking about?" He comes to his feet and turns toward her. Outside the window, the sky is growing dark with an echo of his own foreboding. Pamela is on her feet before him, the chair evaporated in a puff of continuity clipping, her expression a cold-eyed challenge.

"I think you know *exactly* what I'm talking about, Manni. It's time to stop playing this fucking game. Grow up, while you've still got the chance!"

"I'm—" He stops. "Who *am* I?" he asks, a chill wind of uncertainty drying the sweat that has sprung up and down his spine. "And what are you doing here?"

"Do you really want to know the answer? I'm dead, remember. The dead know everything. And that isn't necessarily good for the living. . . ."

He takes a deep breath. "Am I dead too?" He looks puzzled. "There's an adult-me in Seventh Cube Heaven, what's *he* doing here?"

"It's the kind of coincidence that isn't." She reaches out and takes his hand, dumping encrypted tokens deep into his sensorium, a trail of breadcrumbs leading into a dark and trackless part of mindspace. "Want to find out? Follow me." Then she vanishes.

Manni leans forward, baffled and frightened, staring down at the frozen majesty of the onrushing airliner below his window. "Shit," he whispers. *She came right through my defenses without leaving a trace. Who is she?* The ghost of his dead great-grandmother, or something else? *I'll have to follow her if I want to find out*, he realizes. He holds up his left hand, stares at the invisible token glowing brightly inside his husk of flesh. "Take me there," he says.

A fraction of a second later, the floor of the penthouse bucks and quakes wildly and fire alarms begin to shriek as time comes to an end and the frozen airliner completes its journey. But Manni isn't there anymore: and if a skyscraper falls in a simulation with nobody to see it, has anything actually happened?

"I've come for the boy," the cat says bluntly. It sits on the hand-woven rug in the middle of the hardwood floor, with one hind leg sticking out at an odd angle, as if it's forgotten about it. Sirhan teeters on the edge of hysteria for a moment as he apprehends the sheer size of the entity before him, the whimsical posthuman creation of his ancestors. Once a robotic toy companion, a crude electromotive toy from the first decade of the twenty-first century, Aineko was progressively upgraded and patched and periodically migrated to a new hardware platform—until, by some time in the third or fourth decade, it acquired an agenda of its own. By the eighties, when Sirhan first met the cat in the flesh it was already a terrifyingly alien intelligence, manipulative and ironic.

Aineko had manipulated his eigenmother, bending her natural affections away from his real father and toward another man. In moments of black introspection, Sirhan sometimes wonders if the cat wasn't also responsible in some way for his own broken upbringing, the failure to relate to his real parents. It had, after all, been a pawn in the vicious divorce battle between Manfred and Pamela—decades before his birth—and either of them might have buried long-term instructions in its preconscious drives, never suspecting that, in the fullness of time, Aineko would become far more than a simple-minded toy.

"I've come for Manni."

"You're not having him." Sirhan maintains an outer facade of calm,

even though his first inclination is to snap at Aineko. "Haven't you done enough damage already?"

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" The cat stretches its head forward and begins to obsessively lick between the splayed toes of its raised foot. "I'm not making a demand, kid, I said I've *come* for him, and you're not really in the frame at all. In fact, I'm going out of my way to warn you."

"And I say—" Sirhan stopped. "Shit." The curse is an outward demonstration of his inner turmoil. "Please forget what I was about to say, as I'm sure you already know it. Let me begin again, please."

"Fine, we'll play it your way." The cat chews on a loose nail sheath, but its innerspeech is perfectly clear, a casual intimacy that keeps Sirhan on edge. "You've got some idea of what I am, clearly. You know—I ascribe intentionality to you—that my theory of mind is intrinsically stronger than your own, and that my cognitive model of human consciousness is complete. You might well suspect that I use a Turing oracle to think my way around your halting states." The cat isn't worrying at a loose claw now, it's grinning, pointy teeth white and bright in the light streaming in through Sirhan's study window. The window looks out onto the inner space of the habitat cylinder, up at a sky with hillsides and lakes and forests plastered across it. An Escher landscape, modeled with complete perfection inside the baroque cognitive structure Aineko uses in place of a merely human mind. "You've realized that I can think my way around the outside of your box while you're flailing away inside it, and I'm *always* one jump ahead of you. What else?"

Sirhan shivers. Aineko is staring up at him, unblinking. For a moment, he feels at a gut level that he is in the presence of an alien god: it's the simple truth, isn't it? But—"Okay, I concede the point," Sirhan says after a moment in which he spawns a blizzard of panicky cognitive ghosts, fractional personalities, each tasked with the examination of a different facet of the same problem. Driven by a sense of impending doom, the ghosts will work toward a solution before merging back with his memory stream. "You're smarter than I am. I'm just a boringly augmented human being, but you've got a flashy new theory of mind that lets you work around creatures like me the way I can think my way around a real cat." He crosses his arms defensively. "You don't normally rub this in. It's not in your interests to do so, is it? You prefer to hide your manipulative capabilities under an affable exterior, to play with us." There's a note of bitterness in his voice now. Glancing round, Sirhan summons up a chair—and, as an afterthought, a cat basket. "Have a seat. *Why now*, Aineko? What makes you think you can take my . . . ?"

"I didn't say I was going to *take* him, I said I'd come for him." Aineko's tail lashes from side to side in agitation. "I don't deal in primate politics, Sirhan: I'm not a monkey-boy. But I knew you'd react badly, because the way your species socialize—" a dozen metaghosts reconverge in Sirhan's mind, drowning Aineko's voice in an inner cacophony—"would enter into the situation, and it seemed preferable to trigger your territorial/reproductive threat display early, rather than risk it exploding in my face at a more delicate time."

Sirhan waves a hand vaguely at the cat: "Please wait." He's trying to integrate his false memories—the output from the ghosts, their thinking finished—and his eyes narrow suspiciously. "It must be bad. You don't normally get confrontational—you script your interactions with humans ahead of time, so that you maneuver them into doing what you want them to do and thinking it was their idea all along." He tenses. "What is it about Manni that brought you here? What do you want with him? He's just a kid."

"You're confusing Manni with Manfred." Aineko sends a glyph of a smile to Sirhan. "That's your first mistake, even though they're the same person in different states. Think what he's like when he's grown-up."

"But he isn't grown up!" Sirhan complains. "He hasn't been grown up for—"

"—Years, Sirhan. That's the problem. I need to talk to your grandfather, not your son, and not the goddamn stateless ghost in the temple of history. I need a Manfred with a sense of continuity. He's got something that I need, and I promise you I'm not going away until I get it. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Sirhan wonders if his voice sounds as hollow as the feeling in his chest. "But he's our kid, Aineko. We're human. You know what that means to us?"

"Second childhood." Aineko stands up, stretches, then curls up in the cat basket. "That's the trouble with hacking you naked apes for long life, you keep needing a flush and reset job, and then you lose continuity. That's not my problem, Sirhan. I got a signal from the far edge of the Router network, a ghost that claims to be family. Says they finally made it out to the big beyond, out past the Boötes supercluster, found something concrete and important that's worth my while to visit. But I want to make sure it's not like the Wunch before I answer. I'm not letting *that* into my mind, even with a sandbox." The Wunch were alien software parasites—renegade financial instruments—that had colonized the wreckage of a Matrioshka brain civilization a few light years from Earth. They'd nearly killed Aineko and Sirhan's mother Amber, once upon a time, by convincing them that they were old friends: the uploaded minds of spiny lobsters, transcended and set free to roam between the stars by Manfred, many gigaseconds ago. "Do you understand that? I need to instantiate a real live Manfred with all his memories, and get him to vouch for the sapient data packet. It takes a conscious being to authenticate that kind of messenger. Unfortunately, the history temple is annoyingly resistant to unauthorized extraction—I can't just go in and steal a copy of him—and I don't want to use my own model of Manfred: it knows too much about me. So—"

"What's it promising?" Sirhan asks tensely.

Aineko looks at him through slitted eyes, a purring buzz at the base of his throat. "*Everything*."

"There are different kinds of death," the woman called Pamela tells Manni, her bone-dry voice a whisper in the darkness. Manni tries to move, but he seems to be trapped in a confined space: for a moment, he

nearly panics, but then he works it out. "First and most importantly, death is just the absence of life—oh, and for human beings, the absence of consciousness too, but not *just* the absence of consciousness, the absence of the *capacity* for consciousness." The darkness is close and disorienting and Manni isn't sure which way up he is—nothing seems to work. Even Pamela's voice is a directionless ambience, coming from all around him.

"Simple old-fashioned death, the kind that predated the singularity, used to be the inevitable halting state for all life forms. Fairy-tales about afterlives notwithstanding." A dry chuckle. "I used to try to believe a different one before breakfast every day, just in case Pascal's wager was right—exploring the phase space of all possible resurrections, you know? But I think that at this point we can agree that Dawkins was right. Human consciousness is vulnerable to certain types of transmissible memetic virus, and religions that promise life beyond death are a particularly pernicious example because they exploit our natural aversion to halting states. Even to the point of swallowing some really weird ideas. The Latter-day Saints believed that if a man dies, his first wife waits for him in heaven, even if they're divorced and hate each other's guts; the ancient Egyptians believed that people had no less than seven different souls, each with distinct functions and forms. Parasite memes, all surviving on the back of the desperate impulse to deny the reality of self-extinction."

Manni tries to say, *I'm not dead*, but his throat doesn't seem to be working. And now that he thinks about it, he doesn't seem to be breathing either.

"Now, consciousness. That's a fun thing, isn't it? Product of an arms race between predators and prey. If you watch a cat creeping up on a mouse, you'll be able to impute to the cat intentions that are most easily explained by the cat having a theory of mind concerning the mouse—an internal simulation of the mouse's likely behavior when it notices the predator. Which way to run, for example. And the cat will use its theory of mind to optimize its attack strategy. Meanwhile, prey species that are complex enough to have a theory of mind are given a defensive advantage if they can anticipate a predator's actions. Eventually, this very mammalian arms race gave us a species of social ape that used its theory of mind to facilitate signaling, so that the tribe could work collectively—and then reflexively, to simulate the individual's *own* inner states. Put the two things together, signaling and introspective simulation, and you've got human-level consciousness, with language thrown in as a bonus—signaling that transmits information about internal states, not just crude signals such as 'predator here' or 'food here.'"

Get me out of this! Manni feels panic biting into him with liquid helium lubricated teeth. "G-e-t—" for a miracle the words actually come out, although he can't tell quite how he's uttering them, his throat being quite as frozen as his innerspeech. Everything's offlined, all systems down.

"So," Pamela continues remorselessly, "we come to the posthuman. Not just our own neural wetware, mapped out to the subcellular level and executed in an emulation environment on a honking great big computer, like this: that's not posthuman, that's a travesty. I'm talking about beings who are fundamentally *better* consciousness-engines than us merely hu-

man types, augmented or otherwise. They're not just better at cooperation—witness Economics 2.0 for a classic demonstration of that—but better at *simulation*. A posthuman can build an internal model of a human-level intelligence that is, well, as cognitively strong as the original. You or I may think we know what makes other people tick, but we're quite often wrong—whereas real posthumans can actually *simulate* us, inner states and all, and get it *right*. And this is especially true of a posthuman that's been given full access to our memory prostheses for a period of years, back before we realized they were going to transcend on us. Isn't that the case, Manni?"

Manni would be screaming at her right now, if he had a mouth—but instead the panic is giving way to an enormous sense of *déjà vu*. There's something *about* Pamela, something ominous that he knows . . . he's met her before, he's sure of it. And while most of his systems are offline, one of them is very much active: there's a personality ghost flagging its intention of merging back in with him, and the memory delta it carries is enormous, years and years of divergent experiences to absorb. He shoves it away with a titanic effort—it's a very insistent ghost—and concentrates on imagining the feel of lips moving on teeth, a sly tongue obstructing his epiglottis, words forming in his throat—"m-e. . ."

"We should have known better than to keep upgrading the cat, Manni. It knows us too well. I may have died in the flesh, but Aineko *remembered* me, as hideously accurately as the Vile Offspring remembered the random resimulated. And you can run away—like this, this second childhood—but you can't hide. Your cat wants you. And there's more." Her voice sends chills up and down his spine, for without him giving it permission the ghost has begun to merge its stupendous load of memories with his neural map and her voice becomes freighted with erotic/repulsive significance, the result of conditioning feedback he subjected himself to a lifetime—lifetimes?—ago. "It's been *playing* with us, Manny, possibly from before we realized it was conscious."

"Out—" Manfred stops. He can see again, and move, and feel his mouth. He's *himself* again, physically back as he was in his late twenties all those decades ago when he'd lived a peripatetic life in pre-singularity Europe. He's sitting on the edge of a bed in a charmingly themed Amsterdam hotel with a recurrent motif of philosophers, wearing jeans and a collarless shirt and a vest-of-pockets crammed with the detritus of a long-obsolete personal area network, his crazily clunky projection specs sitting on the bedside table. Pamela stands stiffly in front of the door, watching him. She's not the withered travesty he remembers seeing on Saturn, a half-blind Fate leaning on the shoulder of his grandson. Nor is she the vengeful Fury of Paris, or the scheming fundamentalist devil of the Belt. Wearing a sharply tailored long-skirted suit over a red-and-gold brocade corset, blonde hair drawn back like fine wire in a tight chignon, she's the focused, driven force of nature he first fell in love with: repression, domination, his very own strict machine.

"We're dead," she says, then gives voice to a tense half-laugh. "We don't have to live through the bad times again if we don't want to."

"What is this?" he asks, his mouth dry.

"It's the reproductive imperative." She sniffs. "Come on, stand up. Come here."

He stands up obediently, but makes no move toward her. "Whose imperative?"

"Not ours." Her cheek twitches. "You find things out when you're dead. That fucking cat has got a lot of questions to answer."

"You're telling me that—"

She shrugs. "Can you think of any other explanation for all this?" Then she steps forward and takes his hand. "Division and recombination. Partitioning of memetic replicators into different groups, then careful cross-fertilization. Aineko wasn't just breeding a better Macx when he arranged all those odd marriages and divorces and eigenparents and forked uploads—Aineko is trying to breed our *minds*." Her fingers are slim and cool in his hand, and he feels a momentary revulsion, as of the grave, and shudders, before he realizes that it's his conditioning cutting in. Stuff that shouldn't still be active after all this time. "Even our divorce. If—"

"Surely not." Manni remembers that much already. "Aineko wasn't even conscious back then!"

Pamela raises one sharply sculpted eyebrow. "You sure?"

"You want an answer," he says.

She breathes deeply, and he feels it on his cheek: it raises the fine hairs on the back of his neck. Then she nods stiffly. "I want to know how much of our history was scripted by the cat. Back when we thought we *were* upgrading his firmware, were we? Or was he letting us *think* that we were?" A sharp hiss of breath. "The divorce. Was that us? Or were we being manipulated?"

"Our memories, are they real? Did any of that stuff actually *happen* to us? Or—"

She's standing about twenty centimeters away from him, and Manfred realizes that he's acutely aware of her presence, of the smell of her skin, the heave of her bosom as she breathes, the dilation of her pupils. For an endless moment he stares into her eyes and sees his own reflection—her theory of his mind—staring back. *Communication*. Strict machine. She steps back a pace, spike heel clicking, and smiles ironically. "You've got a host body waiting for you, freshly fabbed: seems Sirhan was talking to your ghost in the temple of history and it decided to elect for reincarnation. Quite a day for coincidences, isn't it? Why don't you go merge with it—I'll meet you, then we can go and ask Aineko some hard questions."

Manfred takes a deep breath and nods. "Okay. . ."

Little Manni—a clone off the family tree, which is actually a directed cyclic graph—doesn't understand what all the fuss is about, but he can tell when Momma, Rita, is upset. It's something to do with the pussy-cat thing, that much he knows, but Momma doesn't want to tell him. "Go play with your friends, dear," she says distractedly, not even bothering to spawn a ghost to watch over him.

Manni goes into his room and rummages around in his toyspace for a bit, but there's nothing quite as interesting as the cat in there. The pussy-cat thing smells of adventure, the illicit explicit, and Manni wonders

where Daddy's taken it. He tries to call big-Manni-ghost, but big-self isn't answering: he's probably sleeping or something. So after a distracted irritated fit of play—which leaves the toyspace in total disarray, Sendak-things cowering under a big bass drum—Manni gets bored. And because he's still basically a little kid, and not fully in control of his own metaprogramming, instead of adjusting his outlook so that he isn't bored any more he sneaks out through his bedroom gate (which big-Manni-ghost reprogrammed for him some time ago so that it would forward to an underused public A-gate that he'd run a man-in-the-middle hack on, so he could use it as a proxy teleport server) then down to the underside of Red Plaza, where skinless things gibber and howl at their tormentors, broken angels are crucified on the pillars that hold up the sky, and gangs of semi-feral children act out their psychotic fantasies on mouthless android replicas of parents and authorities.

Lis is here, and Vipul and Kareen and Morgan. Lis has changed her body for war, an ominous gray battlebot husk with protruding spikes and a belt of morningstars that whirl threateningly around her. "Manni! Play war?"

Morgan's got great crushing pincers instead of hands and Manni is glad he came motie-style, his third arm a bony scythe from the elbow down. He nods excitedly. "Who's the enemy?"

"Them." Lis precesses and points at a bunch of kids on the far side of a pile of artistically arranged rubble who are gathered around a gibbet, poking things that glow into the flinching flesh of whatever is incarcerated in the cast-iron cage. It's all make-believe, but the screams are convincing all the same, and they take Manni back for an instant to the last time he died down here, the uneasy edit around a black hole of pain surrounding his disemboweling. "They've got Lucy and they're torturing her, we've got to get her back." Nobody really *dies* in these games, not permanently, but children can be very rough indeed, and the adults of New Japan have found that it's best to let them have at each other and rely on City to redact the damage later. Allowing them this outlet makes it easier to stop them doing *really* dangerous things that threaten the structural integrity of the biosphere

"Fun." Manni's eyes light up as Vipul yanks the arsenal doors open and starts handing out clubs, chibs, spikies, shuriken, and garrotes. "Let's go!"

About ten minutes of gouging, running, fighting, and screaming later, Manni is leaning against the back of a crucifixion pillar, panting for breath. It's been a good war for him so far, and his arm aches and itches from the stabbing, but he's got a bad feeling it's going to change. Lis went in hard and got her chains tangled up around the gibbet supports—they're roasting her over a fire now, her electronically boosted screams drowning out his own hoarse gasps. Blood—not his—drips down his arm, spattering from the tip of his claw. He shakes with a crazed hunger for hurt, a cruel need to inflict pain. Something above his head makes a *scritch, scritch* sound and he looks up. It's a crucified angel, wings ripped where they've thrust the spikes in between the joints that support the great, thin, low-gee flight membranes. It's still breathing, nobody's bothered disemboweling it yet, and it wouldn't be here unless it was *bad*, so—

Manni stands, but as he reaches out to touch the angel's thin, blue-

skinned stomach with his third arm fingernail, he hears a voice: "Wait." It's innerspeech, and it bears ackles of coercion, superuser privileges that lock his elbow joint in place. He mewls frustratedly and turns round, ready to fight.

It's the cat. It sits hunched on a boulder behind him—this is the odd thing—right where he was looking a moment ago, watching him with slitty eyes. Manni feels the urge to lash out at it, but his arms won't move, and neither will his legs: this may be the Dark Side of Red Plaza, where the bloody children play and anything goes, and Manni may have a much bigger claw than anything the cat can muster, but City still has some degree of control and the cat's ackles effectively immunize it from the carnage to either side. "Hello, Manni," says the pussy-cat thing. "Your dad's worried: you're supposed to be in your room, and he's looking for you. Big-you gave you a back door, did he?"

Manni nods jerkily, his eyes going wide. He wants to shout and lash out at the pussy-cat thing but he can't. "What are you?"

"I'm your . . . fairy god-father." The cat stares at him intently. "You know, I do believe that you don't resemble your archetype very closely—not as he was at your age—but yes, I think on balance you'll do."

"Do what?" Manni lets his motie-arm drop, perplexed.

"Put me in touch with your other self. Big-you."

"I can't," Manni begins to explain. But before he can continue the pile of rock whines slightly and rotates beneath the cat, who has to stand and do a little twirl in place, tail bushing up in annoyance.

Manni's father steps out of the T-gate, glances around, his face a mask of disapproval. "Manni! What do you think you're doing here? Come home at—"

"—He's with me, history-boy," interrupts the cat, nettled by Sirhan's arrival. "I was just rounding him up."

"Damn you, I don't need your help to control my son! In fact—"

"Mom said I could—" Manni begins.

"And what's that on your sword?" Sirhan's glare takes in the whole scene, the impromptu game of capture-the-gibbeted-torture-victim, the bonfires and screams. The mask of disapproval cracks, revealing a core of icy anger. "You're coming with me!" He glances at the cat. "You too, if you want to talk to him—he's grounded."

Once upon a time, there was a pet cat.

Except, it wasn't a cat.

Back when a young entrepreneur called Manfred Macx was jetting around the not-yet-disassembled structures of an old continent called Europe, making strangers rich and fixing up friends with serendipitous business plans—a desperate displacement activity, spinning his wheels in a vain attempt to outrun his own shadow—he used to travel with a robotic toy in the shape of a cat. Programmable and upgradeable, Aineko was a third-generation descendant of the original luxury Japanese companion robots. It was all Manfred had room for in his life and he loved that robot. He loved it nearly as much as Pamela, his fiancée, loved him, and she knew it. Pamela, being a whole lot smarter than Manfred gave

her credit for, realized that the quickest way to a man's heart was through whatever he loved. And Pamela, being a whole lot more of a control freak than Manfred realized, was damn well ready to use any restraint that came to hand. Theirs was a very twenty-first century kind of relationship: which is to say, one that would have been illegal a hundred years earlier, and fashionably scandalous a century before that. And whenever Manfred upgraded his pet robot—transplanting its trainable neural network into a new body with new and exciting expansion ports—Pamela would hack it.

They were married for a while, and divorced for a whole lot longer, largely because they were both strong-willed people with philosophies of life that were irreconcilable short of death or transcendence. Manny, being wildly creative and outward-directed and having the attention span of a weasel on crack, had other lovers. Pamela . . . who knows? If on some evenings she put on a disguise and hung out at encounter areas in fetish clubs, she wasn't telling anyone: she lived in uptight America, staidly strait-laced, and had a reputation to uphold. But they both stayed in touch with the *cat*, and although Manfred retained custody for some reason never articulated, Aineko kept returning Pamela's calls—until it was time to go hang out with their daughter Amber, tagging along on her headlong rush into relativistic exile, and subsequently keeping a proprietorial eye on her eigenson Sirhan and his wife and child (a clone off the old family tree, Manfred 2.0). . . .

Now, here's the rub: Aineko wasn't a cat. Aineko was an incarnate intelligence, confined within cat-like bodies that became increasingly realistic over time, and equipped with the processing power to support a neural simulation that grew rapidly with each upgrade.

Did anyone in the Macx family ever think to ask what *Aineko* wanted? And if an answer had there been, would they have liked it?

Adult-Manfred, still disoriented from finding himself awake and re-instantiated a couple of centuries downstream from his hurried exile from Saturn system, is hesitantly navigating his way toward Sirhan's and Rita's home when big-Manni-with-Manfred's-memory-ghost drops into his consciousness like a ton of computronium, thinking furiously and glowing red-hot at the edges.

It's a classic oh-shit moment. Between one foot touching the ground and the next, Manfred stumbles hard, nearly twisting an ankle, and gasps. He *remembers*. At third hand, he remembers being reincarnated as Manni, a bouncing baby boy for Rita and Sirhan (and just why they want to raise an ancestor instead of creating a new child of their own is one of those cultural quirks that is so alien he can't comprehend it fully at first). Then, for a while, he recalls living as Manni's amnesic adult-accelerated ghost, watching over his original from the consensus cyberspace of the city: the arrival of Pamela, adult Manni's reaction to her, her dump of yet another copy of Manfred's memories into Manni, and now this—*how many of me are there?* He wonders nervously. Then: *Pamela, what's she doing here?*

Manfred shakes his head and looks about. Now that he remembers be-

ing big-Manni, he knows where he is implicitly, and, more importantly, knows what all these next-gen City interfaces are supposed to do. The walls and ceiling are carpeted in glowing glyphs that promise him everything from instant-access local services to teleportation across interstellar distances. *So they haven't quite collapsed geography yet*, he realizes, fastening on to the nearest comprehensible thought of his own before old-Manni's memories explain everything for him. It's a weird sensation, seeing all this stuff for the first time—the trappings of a technosphere centuries ahead of the one he'd last been awake in—but with the memories to explain it all. He finds his feet are still carrying him forward, toward a grassy square lined with doors opening onto private dwellings. Behind one of them he's going to meet his descendants—and Pamela, too, in all probability. The thought makes his stomach give a little queasy backflip. *I'm not ready for this—*

An acute moment of *déjà vu*. He's standing on a familiar doorstep he's never seen before. The door opens, and a serious-faced child with three arms—he can't help staring, the extra one is a viciously barbed scythe of bone from the elbow out—looks up at him. "Hello, me," says the kid.

"Hello, you." Manfred stares. "You don't look the way I remember." But Manni looks the way big-Manni remembers, captured by the unblinking Argus awareness of the panopticon dust floating in the air. "Are your parents home? Your—" his voice cracks—"great-grandmother?"

The door opens wider. "You can come in," the kid says gravely. Then he hops backward and ducks shyly into a side-room—or as if expecting to be gunned down by a hostile sniper, Manfred realizes. It's tough being a kid when there are no rules against lethal force because you can be restored from backup.

Inside the dwelling—calling it a house seems wrong to Manfred, when bits of it are separated by trillions of kilometers of empty space—things feel a bit crowded. He can hear voices from the day-room so he goes there, brushing through the archway of thornless roses that Rita has trained to grow around the T-gate frame. His body feels lighter, but his heart is heavy as he looks around. "Rita?" He asks. "And—"

"Hello, Manfred." Pamela nods at him guardedly.

Rita raises an eyebrow at him. "The cat asked if he could borrow the household assembler. I wasn't expecting a family reunion. . . ?"

"That's right." Manfred rubs his forehead ruefully. "Neither was I. Pamela, this is Rita. She's married to Sirhan. They're my—I guess eigenparents is as good as term as any? I mean, they're bringing up my reincarnation."

"Please, have a seat," Rita offers, waving at the empty floor between the patio and the stone fountain in the shape of a section through a glass hypersphere. A futon of spun diamondoid congeals out of the utility fog floating in the air, glittering in the artificial sunlight. "Sirhan's just taking care of Manni—our son. He'll be with us in just a minute."

Manfred sits gingerly at one side of the futon. Pamela sits stiffly at the opposite edge, not meeting his eye. Last time they met in the flesh—an awesome gulf of years previously—they'd parted cursing each other, on opposite sides of a fractious divorce as well as an ideological barrier as high as a continental divide. But many subjective decades have passed,

and both ideology and divorce have dwindled in significance—if indeed they ever happened. Now that there's common cause to draw them together, Manfred can barely look at her. "How is Manni?" he asks his hostess, desperate for small-talk.

"He's fine," Rita says, in a brittle voice. "Just the usual pre-adolescent turbulence, if it wasn't for . . ." She trails off. A door appears in mid-air and Sirhan steps through it, followed by a small deity wearing a fur coat.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Aineko remarks.

"You're a fine one to talk," Pamela says icily. "Don't you think you'd—"

"—I tried to keep him away from you," Sirhan tells Manfred, "but he wouldn't—"

"That's okay." Manfred waves it off. "Pamela, would you mind. . . ?"

"Sure." She glances at him sidelong. "You go first."

"Right. You wanted me here." Manfred hunkers down to stare at the cat. "What do you want?"

"If I was your traditional middle-European devil, I'd say I've come to steal your soul," says Aineko, looking up at Manfred and twitching his tail. "Luckily, I'm not a dualist—I just want to borrow it for a while."

"Uh-huh." Manfred raises an eyebrow. "Why?"

"I'm not omniscient." Aineko sits down, one leg sticking out sideways, but continues to stare at Manfred. "I had a . . . a telegram, I guess, claiming to be from you. From the other copy of you, that is, the one that went off through the Router network with another copy of me, and with Amber, and everyone else who isn't here. It says that it found the answer and it wants to give me a shortcut route out to the big deep thinkers at the edge of the observable universe. It knows who made the wormhole network and why, and—" Aineko pauses. If he was human he'd shrug, but being a cat he absent-mindedly scratches behind his left ear with a hind leg. "Trouble is, I'm not sure I can trust it. So I need you to *authenticate* the message. I don't dare use my own memory of you, because it knows too much about me; if the package is a Trojan, it might find out things I don't want it to learn. I can't even redact its memories of me—that, too, would convey useful information to the package if it is hostile. So I want a copy of you from the museum, fresh and uncontaminated."

"Is that all?" Sirhan asks incredulously.

"Sounds like enough to me," Manfred responds. Pamela opens her mouth, ready to speak, but Manfred makes eye contact and shakes his head infinitesimally. She looks right back and—a shock goes through him—nods and closes her mouth. The moment of complicity is dizzying. "I want something in return."

"Sure," says the cat. It pauses. "You realize that it's a destructive process?"

"It's a—*what?*"

"I need to make a running copy of you. Then I introduce it to the, uh, alien information, in a sandbox. The sandbox gets destroyed afterward—it emits just one bit of information, a yes or no to the question, can I trust the alien information?"

"Uh." Manfred begins to sweat. "Uh. I'm not so sure I like the sound of that."

"It's a copy." Another cat-shrug moment. "*You're a copy. Manni is a copy. You've been copied so many times it's silly—you realize that every few years, every atom in your body changes? Of course, it means a copy of you gets to die after a lifetime or two of unique, unrepeatable experiences that you'll never know about, but that won't matter to you.*"

"Yes, it does! You're talking about condemning a version of me to death! It may not affect me, here, in this body, but it certainly affects that *other* me. Can't you—"

"No, I can't. If I agreed to rescue the copy if it reached a positive verdict, that would give it an incentive to *lie* if the truth was that the alien message is untrustworthy, wouldn't it? It would also be a back-channel through which the message could attempt to encode an attack on me. One bit, Manfred, no more."

"Agh." Manfred stops talking. He knows he should be trying to come up with some kind of objection, but Aineko must have already considered all his possible responses and planned strategies around them— "where does *she* fit into this?" he asks, nodding at Pamela.

"Oh, she's your payment," Aineko says with studied insouciance. "I have a very good memory for people, especially people I've known for decades. You've outlasted that crude emotional conditioning you used on yourself after the divorce, and as for *her*, she's a good reinstantiation of—"

"Do you know what it's like to *die*?" Pamela asks, finally losing her self-control. "Or would you like to find out? Because if you keep talking about me as if I'm a *slave*—"

"What makes you think you aren't?" The cat is grinning hideously, needle-like teeth bared. *Why doesn't she hit it?* Manfred asks himself fuzzily, wondering also why he feels no urge to move against the monster. "Hybridizing you with Manfred was, admittedly, a fine piece of work on my part, but you were bad for him during his creative years. A contented Manfred is an idle Manfred. I got several extra good bits of work out of him by splitting you up, and by the time he burned out Amber was ready. But I digress; if you give me what I want, I shall *leave you alone*. It's as simple as that. Raising new generations of Macx's has been a good hobby if you like, you make good pets, but ultimately it's limited by your stubborn refusal to transcend your humanity. So that's what I'm offering. Let me destructively run a copy of you to completion in a black box along with a purported Turing oracle based on yourself, and I'll let you go, Manfred. And you, Pamela. I won't return to haunt your descendants, either." The cat glances over its shoulder at Sirhan and Rita, who clutch at each other in abject horror, and now Manfred can sense a faint shadow of Aineko's huge algorithmic complexity hanging over the household like a lurching nightmare out of number theory.

"Is that all we are to you? A pet-breeding program?" Pamela demands angrily. She's run up against Aineko's implanted limits too, Manfred realizes, and feels a sense of horror. *Did we only split up because of. . . ?* It's hard to believe: Manfred is too much of a realist to trust the cat to tell the truth except when it serves to further its own interests, but this—

"Not entirely." Aineko is complacent. "Not at first, before I was aware of my own existence. Besides, you humans keep pets too. But you *were* fun to play with."

Pamela stands up, angry to the point of storming out. Before he quite realizes what he's doing Manfred is on his feet too, one arm protectively around her shoulders. "Tell me this first, are our memories our own?" he demands.

"Don't trust it," Pamela says sharply. "It's not human and it lies."

"Yes, they are," says Aineko. It yawns. "Tell me I'm lying, bitch," it adds mockingly. "I carried you around in my head for long enough to know that you've got no evidence."

"But I—" Her arm slips around Manfred's waist. "I don't hate him." A rueful laugh. "I *remember* hating him, but—"

"Humans: such a brilliant model of emotional self-awareness," Aineko says with a theatrical sigh. "You're as stupid as it's possible for an intelligent species to be—there being no evolutionary pressure to be any smarter—but you still don't internalize that and act accordingly around your superiors. Listen, girl, everything you remember is true. That doesn't mean you remember it because it actually happened, just that you remember it because you experienced it internally. Your memories of experiences are accurate, but your emotional *responses* to those experiences were manipulated. Get it? One ape's hallucination is another ape's religious experience, it just depends on which one's god module is overactive at the time. That goes for all of you." Aineko looks around at them in mild contempt. "But I don't need you any more, and if you do this one thing for me you're going to be free. Understand? Say yes, Manfred, if you leave your mouth open like that a bird will nest on your tongue."

"Say no—" Pamela urges him, just as Manfred says, "Yes."

Aineko laughs, baring contemptuous fangs at them. "Ah, primate family loyalty! So wonderful and reliable. Thank you, Manny, I do believe you just gave me permission to copy and enslave you—"

Which is when Manni, who has been waiting in the doorway for the past minute, leaps on the cat with a scream and a scythe-like arm drawn back and ready to strike.

The cat-avatar is, of course, ready for Manni: it whirls and hisses, extending diamond-sharp claws. Sirhan shouts: "No! Manni!" and begins to move, but adult-Manfred freezes, realizing with a chill that what is happening is more than is apparent. Manni grabs for the cat with his human-hands, catching it by the scruff of its neck and dragging it toward his vicious scythe-arm's edge. There's a screech, a nerve-wracking caterwauling, and Manni yells, bright parallel blood-tracks on his arm—the avatar is a real fleshbody in its own right, with an autonomic control system that isn't going to give up without a fight, whatever its vastly larger exocortex thinks—but Manni's scythe slashes, and there's a horrible bubbling noise and a spray of blood as the pussy-cat thing goes flying. It's all over in a second, before any of the adults can really move. Sirhan scoops up Manni and yanks him away, but there are no hidden surprises. Aineko's avatar is just a broken rag of bloody fur, guts, and blood spilled across the floor. The ghost of a triumphant feline laugh hangs over their innerspeech ears for a moment then fades.

"Bad boy!" Rita calls, standing and striding forward furiously. Manni

cowers, then begins to cry, a safe reflex for a little boy who doesn't quite understand the nature of the threat to his parents.

"No! It's all right," Manfred begins to explain.

Pamela tightens her grip around him. "Are you still. . .?"

"Yes." He takes a deep breath.

"You bad, *bad* child—"

"—It was going to *eat* him!" Manni protests as his parents bundle him protectively out of the room, Sirhan casting a guilty look over his shoulder at the adult instance and his ex-wife. "I had to stop the bad thing!"

Manfred feels Pamela's shoulders shaking. It feels like she's about to laugh. "I'm still here," he murmurs, half-surprised. "Spat out, undigested, after all these years. At least, *this* version of me thinks he's here."

"Did you believe it?" She finally asks, a tone of disbelief in her voice.

"Oh yes." He shifts his balance from foot to foot, absent-mindedly stroking her hair. "I believe everything it said was intended to make us react exactly the way we did. Up to and including giving us good reasons to hate it, and provoking Manni into disposing of its avatar. Aineko wanted to check out of our lives and figured that a sense of cathartic closure would help. Not to mention playing the *deus ex machina* in the narrative of our family life. Fucking classical comedians." He checks a status report with Citymind, and sighs: his version number has just been bumped a point. "Tell me, do you think you'll miss having Aineko around? Because you won't be hearing from him again—"

"Don't talk about that, not now," she orders him, digging her chin against the side of his neck. "I feel *used*."

"With good reason." They stand holding each other for a while, not speaking, not really questioning why—after so much time apart—they've come together again. "Hanging with the gods isn't safe for us mere mortals. You think *you've* been used? Aineko has probably killed me by now. Unless it was lying about disposing of the spare copy, too."

She shudders in his arms. "That's the trouble with dealing with posthumans; their mental model of you is likely to be more detailed than your own. . . ."

"How long have you been awake?" he asks, gently trying to change the subject.

"I—oh, I'm not sure." She lets go of him and steps back, watching his face appraisingly. "I remember back on Saturn, stealing a museum piece and setting out, and then, well, I was here, wasn't I?"

"I think." He wets his lips. "We've both been given a wake-up call. Or maybe a second chance. What are you going to do with yours?"

"I don't know." That appraising look again, as if she's trying to work out what he's worth. He's used to it, but this time it doesn't feel hostile. "We've got too much history for this to be easy. Either Aineko was lying, or . . . not. What about you?"

He knows what she's asking. "Want to try it?" he asks, offering her a hand.

"This time," she takes his hand, "without adult supervision." She smiles gratefully, and they walk toward the gateway together, to find out how their descendants are dealing with their sudden freedom. ○

SISYPHUS AND THE STRANGER

Paul Di Filippo

Our esteemed book reviewer has three of his own books coming out in 2004: *Neutrino Drag*, a short-story collection from Four Walls Eight Windows; *Harp, Pipe and Symphony*, a fantasy novel from Prime; and *Plumage from Pegasus*, his collected humor columns, also from Prime. He tells us, "We've acquired a new cat recently, named Penny Century after a character in the *Love and Rockets* comics. Introducing her to people, I distinguish her from the older, smaller, gentler cat by using a line from Homer Simpson: "I call the big one 'Bitey.' "

Albert Camus was tired. Tired of his job. Tired of his life. Tired of the vast empire he daily helped, in however small a manner, to sustain.

Yet he had no choice but to continue, he felt, like Sisyphus forever rolling his stone up the mountain. His future was determined, all options of flight or rebirth foreclosed.

Sitting in his office in the Imperial Palace in Algiers, Camus held his weary head in his hands. He had been awake now for thirty-six hours straight, striving to manage all the preparations for the dual anniversary celebrations about to commence. This year of nineteen-fifty-four marked fifty years since the glorious discovery of N-rays, and forty years since the birth of the French Empire out of the insufficient husk of the Third Republic. All around the Empire, from the palmy isles of the Caribbean to the verdant coasts of South America, from the steaming jungles of Indochina to the tranquil lagoons of Polynesia, across the tawny veldts and plains of Africa and into the lonely islands of the Indian Ocean, wherever the proud French flag flew, in scores of colonies and protectorates, similar preparations were underway.

Poster-sized images of the stern-faced Emperor and of the genius in-

ventor René Blondlot, bald and Vandyked, had to be mounted everywhere under yards of tri-color bunting. The façades of public buildings had to be cleansed with a mild application of N-rays. Ballrooms had to be decorated, caterers consulted, parade routes mapped, permits for vendors stamped, invitations issued. Indigent street Arabs had to be rounded up and shipped to the provinces. The narrow, stepped streets of the Casbah had to be locked down to prevent any awkward demonstrations, however small and meek, against the French and their festivities. (Listening to the complaints of merchants whose trade was pre-emptively hurt in advance of any unlawful gatherings was infinitely preferable to answering the questions of cynical reporters concerning the corpses of demonstrators charred to cinders by the N-ray cannons of the police.) And perhaps most importantly, security measures for the visit of the Emperor had to be checked and double-checked.

And of course, Camus's superior, Governor-General Merseault, was absolutely no help. The fat, pompous toad was excellent at delivering speeches once they were written for him, and at glad-handing businessmen and pocketing their bribes. But for achieving any practical task the unschooled Merseault (an appointee with relatives in high places back in France) relied entirely on his underling, Camus, trained in the demanding foreign-service curriculum of the prestigious Ecole Nationale d'Administration.

Camus lifted his head from the cradle of his hands and smiled grimly, his craggily handsome face beneath a thick shock of oiled black hair seamed with the lines of stress. *Ah, Mother and Father*, he thought, *if only you could see your little boy today, for whom you scraped and saved so that he might get the best education in the ancestral homeland. At a mere forty-one years of age, he has become the power behind a certain small throne, yet finds himself utterly miserable.*

But of course Camus's parents could not witness today his abject state. They had both perished in Algiers in the anti-piednoir riots of 1935, roughly twenty years into the existence of the Empire, when Camus himself had been safely abroad in Paris. So many had died in that holocaust, both Europeans and Arabs, before the soldiers of the Empire with their fearsome N-ray weapons and N-ray-powered armored vehicles had managed to restore order. Since that harsh exercise of power, however, peace and harmony had reigned in Algeria and across the Empire's many other possessions, several of which had received similar instructional slaughters.

Camus's sardonic smile faded as he contemplated the bloody foundations of the current era of global peace and prosperity emanating from Paris. He reached for a pack of cigarettes lying next to an overflowing ashtray, secured one and lit up. An abominable, necessary habit, smoking, but one that was slightly excusable in these days when lung cancer could be cured by medically fractionated N-rays, as easily as the rays had cured Camus's childhood tuberculosis—at least if the patient was among the elite, of course. Puffing his cigarette, leaning back in his caster-equipped chair, Camus permitted himself a few minutes of blissful inactivity. Two flies buzzed near the high ceiling of his small, unadorned, spartan office.

The blinding summer sunlight of Algiers, charged with supernal luminance by reflection off Camus's beloved ancient Mediterranean, slanted in molten bars through the wooden Venetian blinds, rendering the office a cage of radiance and shadow. Yet the space remained cool, as N-ray-powered air-conditioners hummed away.

Camus's mind had drifted into a wordless place when the screen of the interoffice television on his desk pinged, then lit up with the N-ray-sketched face of his assistant, Simone Hié, an austere woman of Camus's own years.

"M'sieur Camus, the American Ambassador is here to see you."

Camus straightened up and stubbed out his cigarette. "Send him in, please."

As the door opened, Camus was already on his feet and moving around his desk to greet the diplomat.

"Ah, Ambassador Rhinebeck," said Camus in his roughly accented English as he shook the American's hand, "a pleasure to see you. I assume your office has received all the necessary ducats for the various celebrations. There will be no admission to events without proper invitations, you understand. Security demands—"

The silver-haired, jut-jawed Rhinebeck waved away the question in a gruff manner. Not for the first time, Camus was simultaneously impressed and appalled by the American's typical bluntness.

"Yes, yes," the Ambassador replied, "all that paperwork is being handled by my assistants. I'm here on a more important matter. I need to see the Governor-General immediately, to register a formal protest."

One of Camus's many duties was, if at all possible, blocking just such annoying demands on Merseault's limited capacities. "A formal protest? On what matter? Surely such a grave step is not required between two nations with the amiable relations that characterize the bonds between the United States and the Empire. I'm certain I could be of help in resolving any trivial matter that has arisen."

Rhinebeck's blue eyes assumed a steely glint against his sun-darkened skin. Despite the air-conditioning, Camus began to sweat. The two flies that had been hovering far above had now descended and were darting about Camus's head, making an irritating buzz. Camus wanted to swat at them, but refrained, fearing to look foolish.

"This is not a trivial matter," said Rhinebeck. "Your Imperial soldiers have detained a party of innocent American tourists on the southern border with Niger. They are refusing to release them until they have been interrogated by your secret service. There's even talk of transferring them to Paris. These actions are in violation of all treaties, protocols, and international standards. I must see Merseault immediately to demand their release."

Camus considered this news. There was a large military installation on the border with Niger, where N-ray research deemed too hazardous to be permitted in the homeland took place. Was it possible that these "innocent American tourists" were spies, seeking to steal the latest developments in the technology that had granted France uncontested global supremacy? Quite possibly. And if so, then Merseault, in his amateurish,

naive, blundering way, might very well cave in to Rhinebeck's demands and grant the American concessions that would prove damaging to the best interests of the Empire. This possibility Camus could not permit. Best to let the military and the omnipresent Direction Generale de la Securité Exterieur handle this affair.

Camus was tired of the Empire, yes. But when all was said and done, he knew nothing else. His course became clear, and any hesitancy vanished.

Time to push the rock uphill once again.

"Ambassador Rhinebeck, I regret that I cannot forward your request for an audience to the Governor-General. However, you may rest assured that I will personally monitor the situation and keep you informed as to the fate of your countrymen."

Rhinebeck's resolve and bluster seemed to evaporate in a moment, in the face of Camus's brusqueness. He suddenly looked older than his years. "So, more stone-walling. I had hoped for better from you, Albert, since I thought we were friends. But ultimately I should have expected such a response from someone in your superior position of strength. You realize that America is toothless against the Empire. There's nothing we have to offer in exchange, nothing we can do, no threat we can make, to sway the Empire toward our point of view."

"Oh, come now, Henry, don't take that tack. Surely you exaggerate—"

"Do I? Maybe you know something about my country's international stature that I don't. We face French outposts on all sides of our nation, limiting our actions, forbidding our natural expansion. Quebec, Cuba, Mexico, the Sandwich Islands, all of them under French control and bristling with N-ray armaments. Our trade deficit with France and its possessions grows more burdensome every year. Our allies are equally weak. Spain, Germany, even the formerly majestic United Kingdom have all proven powerless in the face of French conquests. Your Empire has become something totally unprecedented in human history. Let's call it a superpower. No, no—a *hyperpower*. There is no nation left to offer a counterweight to your actions. You do exactly as you please, in any situation, and tell the rest of the world to be damned. Yet frustrating as the political situation is, we could contend with fair competition in international matters. But it's your cultural dominion back home that's really killing us. Our young people are aping French fashions, watching French cinema, reading French books. Our own domestic arts are dying. We're being colonized mentally by your Empire. And that's the most insidious threat of all."

Camus was about to attempt to refute Rhinebeck's unblinkingly realpolitik analysis of global affairs, when he realized that everything the Ambassador had said was absolutely true. Disdaining hypocrisy, Camus merely said, "I am sorry, Henry, that the world is as it is. But we must both make the best of the reality presented to us."

"Easy enough to say from where you sit, in the catbird seat," said Rhinebeck. The Ambassador turned away sharply then and exited.

The encounter left Camus unsettled. He had to get away from his desk. Consulting his watch, Camus saw that it was past one PM. He would go have lunch at Céleste's restaurant.

Camus activated the televisor. "I will be out of the office for the next hour."

"Yes, M'sieur."

Outside, the heat of the July day and the sheer volume of the sunlight smote Camus brutally, yet with a certain welcome familiarity. Born and raised here, Camus had integrated the North African climate into his soul. He recalled his time in Paris as years of feeling alien and apart, distressed by the city's foreign seasons almost as much as by the natives' hauteur when confronted by a colonial upstart. At graduation he had been most relieved, upon securing his first posting, to discover that he had been assigned to the land of his birth. He had never left in all the years since. The love he shared with Algiers, a place open to the sky like a mouth or a wound, was a secret thing in his life, but also the engine that sustained him through all his angst and anomie.

Walking easily down the broad boulevard of the Rue d'Isly, with its majestic European-style buildings nearly a century old, Camus felt his spirit begin to expand. If only he had time for a swim, his favorite pastime, life would begin to taste sweet again. But he could not permit himself such indulgences, not at least until after the Emperor's visit. Flanked by sycamores, the Rue d'Isly boasted parallel sets of trolley tracks running down its middle. At one point the tracks bellied outward to accommodate a pedestaled statue of Professor Blondlot, holding aloft the first crude N-ray generator.

Camus enjoyed watching the cool-legged women pass, the sight of the sea at the end of every cross-street. He purchased a glass of iced lemonade flavored with orange-flowers from an Arab vendor (license prominently displayed). Sipping the cool beverage, Camus was attracted to a public works site where other onlookers congregated. From behind the site's fence spilled the edges of a crackling glare. Camus knew the source of the radiance. N-ray construction machinery was busy slicing through the earth to fashion Algiers's first Metro line, running from Aïn Allah through downtown and on to Aïn Naadja. Camus looked through a smoked-glass port at the busy scene for a moment, then continued on his way. He hoped the new Metro would not mean the extinction of the nostalgia-provoking trolley cars, and made a mental note to arrange some subsidies for the older system.

A few blocks further on, Camus arrived at his destination.

In the doorway of the restaurant, his usual place, stood Céleste, with his apron bulging on his paunch, his white mustache well to the fore. Camus was ushered into the establishment with much to-do and seated at his traditional table. He ordered a simple meal of fish and couscous and sat back to await it with a glass of cold white wine. When his lunch came, Camus consumed it with absentminded bodily pleasure. His thoughts were an unfocused kaleidoscope of recent problems, right up to and including Rhinebeck's visit. But eventually, under the influence of a second glass of wine, Camus found his thoughts turning to his dead parents. He recalled specifically his father's frequent anecdotes surrounding the elder man's personal witnessing of the birth of the Empire.

The year was 1914, and the Great War was newly raging in Europe. Ca-

mus's father was a soldier defending France. Far from his tropical home, Lucien Camus and his comrades were arrayed along the River Marne, preparing for a titanic battle against the Germans, and fully expecting to die, when the miracle happened that saved all their lives. From the rear lines trundled on their modified horse-drawn carriages came curious weapons, guns without open bores, strange assemblages of batteries and prisms and focal reflectors. Arrayed in an arc against the enemy, the uncanny weapons, upon command from Marshal Joffre himself, unleashed deadly purple rays of immense destructive power, sizzling bolts that evaporated all matter in their path. The German forces were utterly annihilated, without any loss of life on the French side.

After this initial trial of the new guns, the Great War—or, as most people later ironically called it, “The Abortive Great War”—continued for only another few months. Impressive numbers of the futuristic weapons were deployed on all fronts, cindering all forces who dared oppose the French. The Treaty of Versailles was signed before the year was over, and the troops of the Triple Entente occupied Germany, with the French contingent predominant, despite objections from partners England and Russia. (Just four years ago, Camus had watched with interest the results of the very first post-war elections allowed the Germans. Perhaps now the French civil overseers in the defeated land could be begin to be reassigned to other vital parts of the Empire.) The transition from Third Republic to Empire was formalized shortly thereafter, with the ascension of the Emperor, the dimwitted, pliable young scion of an ancient lineage.

Of course, the question on all tongues at the time, including Lucien's and his comrades', concerned the origin of the mystery weapons. Soon, the public was treated to the whole glorious story.

Ten years prior to the Battle of the Marne, Professor René Blondlot had been a simple teacher of physics at the University of Nancy when he became intrigued by the newly discovered phenomenon known as X-rays. Seeking to polarize these invisible rays, Blondlot assembled various apparatuses that seemed to produce a subtle new kind of beam, promptly labeled N-rays, in honor of the professor's hometown of Nancy. At the heart of the N-ray generator was an essential nest of prisms and lenses.

In America, a physicist named Robert Wood had tried to duplicate Blondlot's experiments and failed to replicate the French results. He journeyed to Nancy and soon concluded quite erroneously that Blondlot was a fraud. Seeking, in the light of his false judgment, to “expose” the Frenchmen, Wood had made a sleight-of-hand substitution during a key demonstration, inserting a ruby-quartz prism of his own construction in place of Blondlot's original. When, as Wood expected, Blondlot continued to affirm results no one else could see, the American would step forward and reveal that a crucial portion of the apparatus was not even consistent with the original essential design.

Ironically and quite condignly, the ravaging burst of disruptive violet energy that emerged from the modified projector when it was activated incinerated Wood entirely, along with half of Blondlot's lab.

Accepting this fortuitous modification, the scorched but unharmed Blondlot was able to swiftly expand upon his initial discovery. Over the

next several years, he discovered dozens of distinct forms of N-rays, all with different applications, from destructive to beneficent. Eventually his work came to the attention of the French government. When hostilities commenced in June of 1914, the French military had already secretly been embarked on a program of construction of N-ray weapons for some time. Under the stimulus of war, the first guns were hastily finished and rushed to the Marne by September.

Now, forty years later, N-ray technology, much expanded and embedded in France's vast navies, armies, and aerial forces, remained a French monopoly, the foundation on which the ever-expanding Empire rested, and the envy of all other nations, which waged constant espionage to steal the Empire's secrets, spying so far completely frustrated by the DGSE. Not the Russian Czarina nor the British Marxist cadres nor the Chinese Emperor nor the Ottoman Pashas nor the American President had been able to successfully extract the core technology for their own use. And as France's dominion grew, so did all these aforementioned nations shrink.

So much did every schoolchild of the Empire learn. Although not many of them could claim, as Camus could, that their fathers had been present at the very first unveiling of the world-changing devices.

Camus's ruminations were interrupted by the arrival of Céleste at his table. The plump proprietor coughed politely, then tendered a slip of paper to his patron.

"A gentleman left this earlier for you, M'sieur. Please pardon me for nearly forgetting to deliver it."

Camus took the folded sheet of notepaper and opened it. Inside was a simple message.

Dear Sisyphus,

Meet me tonight at the dancehall at Padovani Beach. I have a proposition that will change your life, and possibly the world.

Camus was dumbstruck. How did some stranger come to address him by his unrevealed sardonic nickname for himself? What unimaginable proposition could possibly involve Camus in world-altering events?

Camus summoned Céleste back to the table.

"What did this fellow look like?"

The restaurant owner stroked his mustache. "He was an odd duck. Completely bald, very thin, with odd smoked lenses concealing his eyes. But most startling was his mode of dress. If he's wearing the same clothes when you see him, you won't be able to mistake him. A queer suit like an acrobat's leotard, made of some shiny material and covering even his feet, poked out of the holes of a shabby Arab robe that seemed like some castoff of the souks. At first I thought him part of the circus. But upon reflection, I believe that no circus is in town."

Camus pondered this description. This stranger was no one he knew.

Camus thanked Céleste, folded the note into his pocket, paid his bill, and returned to the office.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a stuporous fog. Camus consumed numerous cups of coffee while attending in mechanical fashion to the never-ending stream of paperwork that flowed across his desk. All the caffeine, however, failed to alleviate the dullness of his thoughts, the dark befud-

dlement that had arrived with the stranger's note. Merseault called on the television once. The Governor-General wanted to insure that his counterpart from the French Congo was bringing all the native women he had promised to deliver during the upcoming festivities. Merseault had a weakness for Nubians. Camus promised to check.

At eight o'clock Camus bade his equally hard-working secretary good-night, and left the Palace. Two streetcar rides later, he arrived at Padovani Beach.

The famous dancehall situated in this location was an enormous wooden structure set amidst a grove of tamarisk trees. Jutting with awnings, the building's entire seaward side was open to the maritime breezes. With the descent of darkness, the place came alive with the violet-tinted N-ray illumination from large glass globes. (Suitably modulated, N-rays could be conducted along copper wires just like electricity.) Couples and single men and women of all classes streamed in, happy and carefree. Notes of music drifted out, gypsy strains recently popular in France. Camus wondered briefly why the intriguing "jazz" he had heard at a reception at the American Embassy had never caught on outside America, but then realized that Rhinebeck's tirade about the unidirectional flow of culture from France outward explained everything.

Inside, Camus went to the bar and ordered a pastis and a dish of olives and chickpeas. Halfheartedly consuming his selections, Camus wondered how he was to meet the writer of the note. If the stranger remained dressed as earlier described, he would be immensely out of place and immediately attract notice. But Camus suspected that the meeting would not occur so publicly.

For an hour, Camus was content simply to admire the dancers. Their profiles whirled obstinately around, like cut-out silhouettes attached to a phonograph's turntable. Every woman, however plain, swaying in the arms of her man, evoked a stab in Camus's heart. No such romantic gamin occupied his life. His needs were met by the anonymous prostitutes of the Marine district, and by the occasional short-term dalliance with fellow civil servants.

Finally Camus's patience began to wear thin. He drained his third pastis and sauntered out to a deck overlooking the double shell of the sea and sky.

The stranger was waiting for him there, sitting on a bench in a twilight corner nominally reserved for lovers, just as Céleste had depicted him.

The stranger's voice was languorous and yet electric. His shrouded eyes disclosed no hints of his emotional state, yet the wrinkles around his lips seemed to hint a wry amusement. "Ah, Albert my friend, I was wondering how long it would take you to grow bored with the trite display inside and visit me."

Camus came close to the stranger, but did not sit beside him. "You know me. How?"

"Oh, your reputation is immense where I come from, Albert. You are an international figure of some repute."

"Do not toy with me, M'sieur. I am a simple civil servant, not an actor or football hero."

"Ah, but did I specify those occupations? I think not. No, you are known for other talents than those."

Camus chose to drop this useless line of inquiry. "Where exactly do you come from?"

"A place both very near, yet very far."

Growing impatient, Camus said, "If you don't wish to answer me sanely, please at least keep your absurd paradoxes to yourself. You summoned me here with the promise of some life-altering program. I will confess that I stand in need of such a remedy for the moribund quandary I find myself in. Therefore state your proposition, and I will consider it."

"So direct! I can see that your reputation for cutting to the heart of the matter was not exaggerated. Very well, my friend, here it is. If you descend to the beach below and walk half a kilometer north, you will encounter a man sleeping in the dunes. He looks like a mere street Arab, but in reality he is a trained Spanish assassin who has made his laborious covert way here from Algeciras and on through Morocco. He intends to kill the Emperor during your ruler's visit here. And he stands a good chance of succeeding, for he is very talented in his trade, and has sympathizers in high places within your Empire."

Camus felt as if a long thin blade were transfixing his forehead. "Assuming this is true, what do you expect me to do about this? Do you want me to inform the authorities? Why don't you just go to them yourself?"

The stranger waved a slim hand in elegant disdain. "Oh, that course of action would be so unentertaining. Too pedestrian by half. You see, I am a connoisseur of choice and chance and character. I believe in allowing certain of my fellow men whom I deem worthy the opportunity to remake their own world by their existential behavior. You are such a man, at such a crucial time and place. You should consider yourself privileged."

Camus tried to think calmly and rationally. But the next words out of his mouth were absolute madness. "You are from the future then."

The stranger laughed heartily. "A good guess! But not the case. Let us just say that I live in the same arrondissement of the multiverse as you."

Camus pondered this response for a time, striving to reorder his very conception of the cosmos. At last he asked a broken question. "This multiverse is ruled—?"

"By no one. It is benignly indifferent to us all. Which makes our own actions all the more weighty and delicious, wouldn't you say?"

Camus nodded. "This is something I only now realize I have always felt."

"Of course."

"Can you give me a hint of the alternate outcomes of my actions? Will one decision on my part improve my world, while its opposite devastates it?"

The stranger chuckled. "Do I look like a prophet to you, Albert? All I can say is that change is inescapable in either case."

Camus contemplated this unsatisfying response for a time before asking, "Do you have anything to aid me if I choose to accept this challenge?"

"Naturally."

The stranger reached beneath his robe and removed a curious gun unlike any Camus had ever seen.

"Its operation is extremely simple. Just press this stud here."

Accepting the gun, Camus said, "I need to be alone now."

"Quite understandable. An act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, like a work of art."

The stranger arose and made as if to leave. But at the last moment, he stopped, turned, and produced a book from somewhere.

"You might as well have this also. Good luck."

Camus accepted the book. The faint violet light reaching him from the dancehall allowed him to make out the large font of its title, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

The author's name he somehow already knew.

After the stranger had gone, Camus sat for some time. Then he descended to the sands and began walking north, carrying both the book and the pistol.

Just where the stranger had specified, Camus found the sleeping man. His hands were pillowing his head as he lay on his side. The waves crashed a maddening lullaby. In the shadows, the sleeper's Iberian profile reminded Camus of his mother, Catherine, who boasted Spanish ancestry herself, a blood passed down to her son.

It occurred to Camus that all he had to do was turn, walk away, and think no more about this entire insane night. His old life would resume its wonted course, and whatever happened in the world at large would happen without Camus's intervention. Yet wasn't that non-action a choice in itself? It crossed his mind that to fire or not to fire might amount to the same thing.

The assassin stirred, yet did not awake. Camus's grip on the pistol tightened. Every nerve in his body was a steel spring.

A second went by. Then another. Then another. And there was no way at all to stop them. ○

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THOUGH I SANG IN MY CHAINS LIKE THE SEA

William Barton

William Barton is a software architect, a trade that can make you see the world inside out, if you're not careful. Over the past thirty years, he's written numerous science fiction pieces, including the award-winning novel *Acts of Conscience* (Warner Aspect, 1997) and several stories for *Asimov's*, most recently, "The Gods of a Lesser Creation" (August 2004). Of the following tale, he says, "Every bright child dreams a certain kind of dream over and over again. I had to dream this one for forty years before I got to write it down. Even now, I don't know if this is how it really goes."

The words of the famous poet always bothered me, even when I was just a little kid. Gladly live? Gladly die? And *then* lay me down with a will? Bullshit. No more than the simple particle theory of our dreams.

It was toward the end of 1964, late fall, my parents split up for six months now, my fourteenth birthday come and gone unnoticed, and things were changed, though not changed enough.

Nighttime. I lay on my side, staring at the black base of the little poodle-shaped lamp on the scruffy old bookcase beside my bed, the two paperbacks I was currently reading, Ace Doubles both, at the row of potted cacti on the dusty windowsill, at the featureless black night beyond the grimy windowpane. The cacti were dying from lack of attention, I thought, and no one's washed my window in a long, long time.

My dog Lucky, a black cocker spaniel with a white blaze on his chest, lay under the desk chair, deep in the shadows of the footwell, staring at me, beady eyes no more than little wet glints, muzzle on his paws, mo-

tionless. He'd been given to me as a Christmas present ten years before, because my parents thought I seemed lonely. Then they'd made me responsible for getting him fed and walked, spanked me when he shit on the rug, and so on. I'd loved him anyway, and liked to have him sleep up in the bed with me, even though it got me fleabit.

I whispered, "Good dog."

He didn't move.

In some other part of the house, beyond my closed door, I could hear my mom talking on the phone, an unintelligible murmur, probably to her boyfriend Ron. Acting funny lately, secretive about something, don't know what, don't know why.

I'd had the lamp as far back as I could remember. Don't know where it came from. The bookcase had been my dad's, had been brought down from my grandma's house in Boston when we moved here in 1958. Originally, it'd been filled with a hodge-podge of children's books, old ones like the Submarine Boys from when Grandpa'd been a boy, Bobby Blake, from Dad, my own Tom Corbett-Space Cadet and Tom Swift, Jr., being displaced now by new paperbacks.

How come I missed Dad *now*? I was glad to see him go, hoping I wouldn't get hit so much, but he was part of these books, wasn't he? We'd walk in the woods on weekends all summer, and talk about the new Andre Norton, or cool things in the Burroughs reprints, which Dad had been reading again, having had the Barsoom and Tarzan stuff as cheap hardcovers when he was a kid.

I remember we'd rummaged in grandma's attic, but all we could find was a tattered Grosset & Dunlap edition of *The Chessmen of Mars*. Those slick St. John illustrations! Plates, like photos, so wonderfully detailed. . . . Anyway, no one was smacking me around now, or making me do my homework, either, but Mom's new friend was drunk every time he came over, and I had to spend most nights in my room with the door closed, while they did what they did on the couch, in front of our only TV.

Jesus, stuck in my room like a little kid! Like my sisters Maryjane and Boudicca, seven and three. I remember trying to explain to my friend Mark who the *real* Boudicca had been, why it wasn't a stupid name at all. Just like Winthrop Dordogne Brundage III, isn't a funny name either. Right, Dad?

Okay. Try to decide which of the two books, four books, really, you want to read tonight. I'd already read *The Arsenal of Miracles* twice, was working on it a third time. Wishing. Wishing for my own stargates, my own spaceships, my own silver-haired girl. Still hadn't made up my mind about M-107, with its annoying nickel price-hike. My allowance was only three bucks a week. Seven books and a Coke, with a nickel left over, versus six books and two cokes even.

I'd done each side of 107 once, and couldn't decide whether I liked *Into the Alternate Universe*, with the wonderful John Grimes, best, or this new *The Coils of Time* thing. Chris Wilkinson just didn't seem quite as cool. Kind of a fuck-up.

Port Forlorn. *Faraway Quest*. The Rim Worlds. The dark sky, all but devoid of stars. That ocean liner, floating in the middle of nowhere. I

reached out and picked it up. Sonya Verrill. Would I want Sonya Verrill as much as I wanted Peganna of the Silver Hair? Or would I be scared of her, just the way I was scared of *real* girls, every day in school?

The bedroom door swung open suddenly, swung open hard, and banged on the closet door with which it shared a corner.

I closed the book again. "Mom?"

She was red in the face, mouth a flat line, her bouffant hair crumpled, like she'd had her hands in it, the way she did when she was upset. "Shut your goddamn light out and go to sleep, Winnie."

I looked at the clock. "It's only eight thirty!"

She took a step into the room. "Do what I say, you little bastard!"

I thought, *You'd* know, bitch . . . my dad's voice echoing angrily in my head. But I reached out and pulled the chain on the poodle-shaped lamp, plunging the room into near darkness, Mom transformed to a black outline against the vaguely bluish light reflecting off the walls from the black-and-white TV in the living room. She stood there for a few seconds, seeming to stare at where I'd been, then turned and stalked off down the hall, leaving a shadow that grew bigger and grayer before it disappeared.

I wanted to get up and close the door, but didn't dare. There was something on the TV, a male voice murmuring, then the rattle of a cheap laugh track. And I could hear my mom crying softly, muffled, probably on the couch, face pressed into one of those tasseled red corduroy cushions she'd bought last year. The ones Dad made fun of.

After a bit, Lucky rustled to his feet, oiled out from under the chair, and padded from the room, almost silent. I remembered how his toenails used to click on the hardwood floors before Dad put in expensive wall-to-wall carpet as a last-ditch bribe for Mom.

I rolled over in bed, onto my back, spreading my legs, toes pressed down by the cool, tightly-tucked-in sheet, pulled my own pillow over my face, leaving my mouth and nose in the little gap between pillow and covers.

It's too early. I'll wake up about four, nothing to do but listen to the wind and faraway highway sounds and be scared. Maybe I can sneak the door shut, turn on the light and read for a while before school. My stomach squirmed. School. Homework undone. Tests failed. Report cards next week. What's Mom going to say? School. Scott picking on me more and more. Everyone laughing. Even the teachers laughing. Even Mark laughing now.

I'd wanted to talk to Mark on the phone that night. No. Go to your room. Can I go out? Knowing I could knock on his door as late as nine and Mark's parents would let him go. But, No, go to your room, goddamn it!

Mark's parents weren't *really* cool. A lot older than mine, or anyone else's, almost forty when he'd been born, an obvious "oops." Funny how Mark Paloverdi never did his homework either, but always got "A's" and "B's." I remember that I noticed how Mark's handwriting was so similar to his dad's. I'd been imitating it myself lately, because it was so tiny and precise, it didn't seem like handwriting at all. I remember that Mark made a kind of sneery grin when I pointed all of this out.

Come on, let's go play, was all he'd said.

If Mom doesn't start letting me out again, Mark'll find someone else to

play with. I thought of the little world we'd created for ourselves, much in imitation of Barsoom, of my character Kantol Hav, the plantman from Lansinar, and Mark's Onol, the mining engineer from Aceta, and wondered who he'd give the world to, our imaginary Jupiter, if I couldn't come visit anymore.

I didn't want to go to school in the morning.

Didn't want to be here in the dark now.

Things change, but they don't change *enough*. For me, for anyone. Not even for the people in the stories. But at least *they* start from a better place.

Drift away. Dream. Rise up renewed from out of the sub-universe of sleep. Morning sunlight fell warm on my face, making me wake up, though my eyes were still closed. There was a strong smell of dust in the room, almost smoky, and I was out from under the covers, cuddled against some coarse roll of heavy cloth, almost like the old wool army blanket I used to use before we got all the new furniture.

In the distance, I thought I heard someone calling, a woman's voice, almost shrill. Outside I guess. Maybe Timmie Moore's mom screaming at him again. Remember the day she chased his little ass down the street, belt whistling in a circle over her head?

I rubbed my face against the cloth, reminiscing. I hated the new furniture, missed the old, wished Dad hadn't taken it. Bribes didn't do a damn bit of good, and now my beloved old bedroom set was in his crappy apartment in Alexandria, Dad sleeping in my comfy old bed.

Sunlight, hot on my face. A pulse of regret. I'd slept all night after all. Time for school. No time for me to read about Bran and Peganna and the Crenn Lir. The sunlight was anomalously hot. *Anomalous*. Smiled, turning my face to the sun, seeing red through my eyelids, loving the way I'd used that bookword. *Anomalous*. Jesus. Sun hot like summer, or like it was very late.

Maybe I'm late for school.

Opened my eyes slowly.

Pang.

What the fuck. . . ?!

All the way awake, prickles going right through me.

I was lying on my back in an oval space maybe ten feet across, lying on coarse white cloth, space enclosed by huge, irregular rolls of more white cloth, making a well maybe four or five feet deep and . . . ceiling. My bedroom ceiling, the square frosted glass shade on the light fixture looking just the same as . . . same as . . . far. So far. I . . .

That shrill woman's voice, calling out from far, far away.

I sat up and twisted, looking toward the lamp and clock on the bookcase. Eight AM! Christ, I *am* late for . . . felt something fall away in the pit of my stomach. Something's wrong with me. It's like the lamp is way off, and . . . way big?

All right. Like a fever, when you feel weak, and it feels like your arms and legs are really, really long, like your hands and feet are ten feet from your head. Oh, *man*. Maybe I'm too sick to go to school.

I stood up slowly, hoping I wouldn't be too dizzy from whatever it was, resting my hands on the chest-high roll of white sheet, looking across an expanse of tan chenille bedspread. This is a pretty good fever dream! I climbed over the sheets and walked toward the edge of the bed, tripping over the tufted patterns in the spread, stopping well short of the curved radius where the mattress corner turned vertical.

Craned my neck. Shivered. The floor looks like it's twenty or thirty feet away. Looked back toward my pillow, which seemed higher than my head. Something banged on the windowpane, and, when I spun to look, I saw a huge bluejay flutter briefly against the dirty glass.

Looked back at the floor. What would I be then? Five, six inches tall? I felt myself smirk. Okay, step off. When your foot touches the carpet, this'll stop. You can go tell Mom you're sick. Stay home and read books. Miss today's algebra test and . . . I put my foot in the air, felt my stomach lurch, threw myself back, cowering on the bedspread, breaking into a sweat, imagining what it'd feel like to fall all that way.

The woman's voice was growing louder, breaking now as she started to shriek for help. Mom. Right.

I stood up, feeling numb, and walked toward the foot of the bed, to where the covers had come untucked a little, bedspread hanging down toward the leg. Well. I can't tell. I stood there dithering, listening to my mom get more hysterical by the minute, wondering what to do.

It's just a dream, isn't it? If I dream it's true, won't I be able to fly, just jump into the air like George Reeves and . . . I never had a dream where I knew it was a dream. You always wake up, covered in sweat, or with come squirting in your shorts, and, Oh. Right. Just a dream.

I leaned down, crumpling thick chenille in my hands, and started to climb down the side of the bed. Easier than I expected. Less scary. I remembered when they taught us rope climbing in gym class, and I couldn't do it, hanging by my hands two inches off the floor, while my classmates jeered and the gym teacher shook his head and rolled his eyes. Pretended I wasn't strong enough, not wanting to say, No, I'm just too afraid.

I got as far as the bedrail before the spread ran out, standing on it, looking down, holding on with one hand. All right. It can't be more than ten or twelve feet now. *Jump*. My guts clenched, almost making me crap in my . . . I suddenly realized that I was naked, though I'd crawled in bed in briefs and a T-shirt, as usual.

In the background, Mom was screaming now, high and sharp, no more words.

There was a sudden shadow and snuffle from the doorway. I looked, felt my jaw drop and my knees knock together, something in me wanting to kneel, cower, swarm back up the bedspread, whatever. It was Lucky—bigger than the giant stuffed elephant they have at the Smithsonian, hairier than a woolly mammoth, staring at me with big, gleaming brown eyes. He slowly stuck out his neck and started to sniff, a series of deep huffing sounds. Started to walk toward me, steps hesitant, across the carpeted floor of my room.

I felt my heart start to race. It's just a fucking dream. It's just a fucking dream. Really. *Really!*

He got close to the bed, still sniffing at me, closer and closer, breath like a burning garbage dump, his muzzle maybe three feet long, canines gleaming from under a black lip like foot-long tyrannosaur fangs.

I tried to think of a prayer I could say, right quick, just in case the priests hadn't lied to me in Catechism school, but all I could come up with was the nonsense version Mark and I had made up and incorporated into one of our imaginary languages, "Sonalemme Don to sleep. . . ." Giggled, going crazy as a loon in my last moments, remembering that, nowadays, Sonalemme Don was the Visor of Norakan, living in a town called Flaquay, on our version of Venus.

Lucky stopped, cocking his head to one side, listening.

I shouted, "Lucky! *Good dog!*"

He leaned closer, sniffing, then suddenly sat down on his haunches, mouth lolling open in a familiar doggy smile, black-spotted pink tongue unfurling, the stench making me woozy.

"*Good doggy!*" The smile widened, head the size of Mark's dad's VW Beetle leaning closer, surrounding me with hot air. Christ, nostrils the size of teacups in a wet, black leather nose I could reach right out and touch. . . . I felt the idea crystallize, come home to roost, whatever the hell it is goofy ideas do.

Reach right out and touch him.

Touch.

Felt my mouth grow dry, my breathing grow shallow.

"Lucky?" He leaned closer, sniffing delicately at my tiny hand. "Good doggy. G-g-g-g. . . ." Stopped in mid stutter, hand resting on the short, stiff-brush quality fur just behind the bare wet skin of his nose.

More sniffing. A soft whine.

I remembered the very first trick I taught him, back when he was a puppy and I was four years old, my parents watching thunderstruck as I placed a Dog Yummy on the bridge of his muzzle and said, "Good doggy. Don't touch it!"

Lucky stiffened into immobility, brown eyes almost crossing as they fixed on me, just beyond where the prized treat should've been. I stood up, not quite shaking, stood and took that magic step forward, right out onto his nose. Breathed, "Good, good doggy. . . ."

Pictured him snapping his head back, taking me down in one gulp, just like the Yummy he'd be expecting. Whatever the fuck you do, don't say, *Okay!* I teetered along his nose, crawled onto his head, slithered between his ears, turned and backed down his neck, straddling him like a bare-back horse, until I was holding onto the greasy old leather of his collar. *Damn.* Lucky was pretty greasy, too. When the hell was the last time we'd washed him? Sitting here, I could just see over the crown of his head.

"Up!"

He came up onto all fours.

"Good doggy!"

Now, what the hell else had I taught him? Here. Stay. Sit. Up. Sit-up, which was kind of like what other people taught their dog as *beg*, but I never liked that idea, making a dog beg. Stand, which put him on his hind legs. Lots of fetch, roll over, and jump through the Hula-Hoop tricks. And

the one trick my dad taught him, which was to come running if he heard the U.S. Cavalry Charge being whistled.

Meanwhile, Mom was still screaming, I could hear my little sisters crying, and, yep, that was the phone starting to ring.

I pulled on his left ear, a gentle tug, and was slightly startled when he turned the way I wanted. "Let's go, Lucky-Lux!" I barely managed to grab the collar in time.

Alice. That's the ticket. *Drink me?* Or was it *Eat me?* Something that made us giggle, anyway. Yeah, I remember. Some kid with a big fist. Eat me, Winnie, you little toad. . . .

It was a beautiful fall day outside, way nicer than you'd expect, this time of year, sky a soft, pale blue, sun high and yellow, more like summer than the beginning of winter, and quite warm, maybe sixty-something. Good thing, too, considering what I had on. You know those clothes little girls get with their Barbie dolls? Turns out they're made out of something like tablecloth material, with lots of little holes to let in the breeze. I was warm enough, though, sitting astride Lucky's back, and real glad my sister had a Ken to keep Barbie company. Pants and a shirt, neither of which hung well, or fit worth a damn. No underwear. Stiff plastic shoes and coarse, scratchy white gym socks.

The top of my head still hurt where I'd banged it on the swinging bottom of the doggie door on my way out of the house, almost scraping me off Lucky's back, Mom's shouts echoing behind me, demanding I "get back here! Right this instant!"

Well, my right ear hurts too, hot and probably bright red, from the clout she'd given me when she saw where I kept looking. What I was looking at, I guess. Helped give me the idea for the Barbie clothes, anyway.

Gee, Mom, you look great in Barbie's . . .

Keep your eyes to yourself!

When the phone rang again, I got to it on doggyback, pulled on the cord and got the receiver to fall. Mark. Are you tiny? Us too! What d'you suppose. . . ?

I could hear his father in the background, shouting about something. And Mark complaining, Jesus, why'd we have to be *doll* sized? If we were a *half*-inch tall, instead. . . . I dunno, Mark. The bugs in Zim's *Insects*. . . . I mean, it wouldn't be like in a story, would it? We'd be killed and eaten.

Meet you down the Creek?

Down the Creek. Down at Marumsc Creek, leftover wilderness from before Murumsc Village began construction in 1957, leftover homeland, I'd heard somewhere, of the long-extinct Doeg Indians, where Mark and I'd met, playing in the woods, when he'd moved here from Arlington in 1959.

Those cool, leafy glades from which everything began, our stories about imaginary people on Venus and Jupiter, our inventions because Edgar Rice Burroughs had written too few books, half of them those silly-ass Tarzan stories.

I rode Lucky down the long, steep hill of Staggs Court toward Carter Lane, which paralleled the Creek on my side, just as Hyl-Ton Avenue did

on Mark's, in a world gone unnaturally quiet. Listen. Birdsound? Maybe, but that's all. No drone of cars and trucks from Route 1, only three miles away. No construction noise from I-95, being extended off the dead end of Shirley Highway. Quiet as a Sunday. No people noise. No nothing.

In the north, I could see a tall column of dark smoke, miles and miles away. Beyond Lorton, anyway. Maybe beyond Springfield.

Felt a cold chill tickle between my shoulder blades.

What happened to all the people who were awake, up and doing things when the Shrinking struck? Driving cars, flying planes? The column of smoke was more or less in the direction of both Fort Belvoir and National Airport.

There were no cars on Carter Lane, other than ones parked by the curb, so I rode Lucky straight across, which seemed to make him nervous till we got to the sidewalk. We rode west toward Brownie's yard, the last yard not blocked by chain link fence, my last access to the Creek closer than the undeveloped far end of Carter Lane, almost a half-mile away.

Brownie's yard. Funny how we still called it that. Brownie had been a little brown-and-white dog who'd lived here a while back, though his owners had been displaced by a family named Davidson, a family with three nasty red-headed kids. We'd liked him, a friendly puppy who licked our hands and seemed to want to go with us, but Brownie had been run over by the school bus one morning, red guts spilled on the blacktop, astonishment frozen in his eyes.

The Creek started at the rear of Brownie's yard, a steep hill covered with greenbriar, but for a narrow dirt path, kept up, I suppose, by my fat ass sliding down into the shadows a few times a week on my way to Mark's house.

CAH!

Lucky twitched, recoiled as a quick black shadow flashed over us. I crouched close to his neck, looking up at a big black bird, a bird with its eye clearly on me. Crow? Raven? I heard Mark's best pedantic voice mutter, *Idiot*. Crows go "Cah." Ravens are bigger. They go "Pruk." Then I heard his father Bart, talking to him as he went inside to explain where he was going, say, That was good, Mark. You *told* him.

I heard Mark's real voice from far away, shouting, "Winnie! Winnie! Over *here!*" Over by the treebridge, I guessed. Mark insisted on calling me Winnie instead of the Win my dad went by, the name I'd go by when I grew up, knowing they all called me "Whiny Winnie." Of course, he wanted to be called "Palo" at school, and got called "Pillow" for his trouble.

That made his father mad. Pillow? I coulda told you that, you silly shit. We're *fat*. Of course they'd call us "Pillow." So I called him Pillow for a while too. Didn't make him call me Win though.

He was standing in the middle of the treebridge, waiting, having beaten me here easily, because this part of the Creek was right across from where Greenacre Drive hit Hyl-Ton, much closer to his house than mine, even though he'd had to walk. I made Lucky sit, knowing he'd refuse to walk on the arched fallen treetrunk, which was barely a foot in diameter—*ten* feet now—felt myself start to feel sick as I walked up the curve of gray bark toward Mark, who wasn't afraid of heights. The three feet down

to the inch-deep water of the creek . . . thirty-five, maybe forty feet, to water only a foot or so deep, covering rocks and gravel?

Mark was facing away from me, dressed in what appeared to be a toga made from one of his father's monogrammed hankies, tied at the waist by twine, things on his feet like booties made of cloth and string, heavy thread maybe. As I stopped beside him, trying not to shake, he spread his arms away and upward. "Look!"

I turned. Felt another hard pang, like I was about to have a bout of diarrhea. The Ant Stump. Maybe ten feet tall. Over a hundred now. Ants busily coming and going. Big black carpenter ants, each one the size of a big-city rat.

I remember we'd found an inch-long eyed elator "click beetle" here one day while messing with the ants. Jesus. What if they remembered that day? What if they knew it was us, the same way Lucky knew it was me?

Mark said, "Think how cool it'd be, if we were half an inch tall, instead of half a foot!"

Watching the line of shiny black bodies come and go, I said, "I don't think I'd want to meet a carpenter ant the size of a Great Dane."

He sneered at me. "Chicken."

"Did you see that crow?"

He looked up, shrugged. "No. There's a brown snake of some kind up in the Nelsons' yard. Big as a boa constrictor."

"That's cool enough for me."

He looked at me quizzically. "We never dreamed about being doll-sized, Winnie. It was always bug-sized."

"Yeah, maybe."

He looked down the trunk, back to where Lucky sat, faithfully waiting. I knew that when I needed to get him across, he'd wade the creek, even swim the deep parts, without blinking an eye. Mark said, "You're lucky. . . ." Grinned then, waiting a beat to see if I'd make the obvious quip. *No, he's Lucky.* When I didn't, he went on. "My father's got Midnight trapped in the basement."

Yeah. Can't ride a fucking kitty-cat, hm? "How big is he?"

Mark grimaced. "The size of a banth!"

Once, there was a girl in a golden dream. A golden girl I remember so well, some princess of Mercury or Mars. Some princess only for me, living in my little golden atom-world. Somewhere. Some when. But not now.

During my visit to Mark's house, I was impressed by his father's preparations. Bart Paloverdi had used kitchen utensils to cut little hatchways with safety-pin hinges in the doors of his house, doing what he could with the many tools, large and small; he had the cat now trapped in a cage of window screens in one corner of the basement workshop.

I remember Mark whining about that, "Poor Midnight. . . ."

But his father brushed him aside, looking down at me, eyes sunk in the fatty pads of late middle age: "The power's going to go off, Winnie. What're you and your family doing to get ready?"

Family? I'd shrugged, ignoring his all-knowing glare, and had eventually gone home, knowing I wouldn't want to eat the split-pea-soupish

gunk they tended to have for lunch. *Especially* now that peas were the size of golfballs.

The power *didn't* go off, and our house remained inhabitable, if inconvenient. No damn way to use a toilet, when it's thirty feet high. Not to mention what would happen if, as you surely would, you fell in. *There's* a fever dream for you. Anyway, we just shit down the sink drains.

I slept in my own room, hundreds of yards from the kitchen, making the laborious climb up into my bed every night, and even tried to read a bit. The paperbacks were just barely little enough to handle, especially the shorter, thinner Ace books, only four feet high, and weighing maybe a hundred pounds or so.

Mom and the girls set up in Maryjane's dollhouse, on the floor of her room, even sleeping in the stiff dollbeds. Something especially cool about that for Mom, a glint in her eye, a softness in her manner, something I hadn't seen since I was little. It was fun. Maybe something from one of her *own* little-kid dreams.

So, the power stayed on, we got the lights on one by one, even the ceiling lamps, once I figured out how to use a twine lasso from Lucky's back, and left them on, though I felt squirmy thinking about what it'd be like to change light bulbs when the time came. And knowing it'd have to be me.

Got the TV turned on, making Lucky stand on his hind legs so I could wrestle with pulling out the little silver knob, knob now the size of a bushel basket. Almost fell when—*clunk*—it came out.

And there was the world, alive and well, albeit filled with teeny-tiny people. Thousands dead in car crashes, of course, and all those falling airliners running out of fuel. One heroic pilot being interviewed in the middle of a monstrous stage set, who'd figured it out and saved his hundred souls.

Those three Russian cosmonauts, trapped and now dead aboard their orbiting Voskhod spacecraft.

And lots of talking heads, fretting the whys and wherefores of the Shrinking, lots of politicians making excuses and promises. LBJ looking more like a droopy old hounddog than ever. Some science guys rambling on and on about the Cube/Square Law and why, maybe, it wasn't so for us.

We made the kitchen more usable by pulling out the drawers in staggered array so we could safely get up on the counters, Mom cooking as best she could on the giant stove, feeding us on Maryjane's teaset dishes. We bathed in the sink then, using a toy ladder of red-painted wood I'd found in the basement to get in and out, ladder part of a hook-and-ladder firetruck I'd gotten when I was seven or so, used the other ladder to get in the refrigerator.

Scared the shit out of me when the door sucked shut with me inside, the little light really going out, just like they said it would, me really glad it was magnetic, rather than having an old-fashioned mechanical latch.

I was proudest of getting the plastic housing off the phone, so I could operate the hook mechanism and dialing switches without moving a hundred pounds of plastic.

Dad, then. Talking to Dad.

I'd gotten the earpiece out of the handset and pulled enough slack on the wire to get it down near the mouthpiece. That had to stay intact, because the microphone wasn't on wires, just sitting loose on a couple of pieces of bent, shiny metal. Anyway, it was better than hopping back and forth.

He was saying, "... it'll be a couple of days before I have the Chevy fully rigged out. I had to find pullies, and quite a bit of pliable wire, so I could mount controls up on the dashboard. I got the engine started yesterday, though. I think this'll work."

Dad's voice sounded strange in the earpiece, like the buzzily magnified voice of an insect. Mom was standing nearby, listening, face reddening, starting to simmer just from hearing me talk to him like that, like I liked him or something. Since the separation, she'd referred to him as "that thing" and didn't like me to say "Dad" anymore.

I said, "That's great, Dad! What're you going to do once you're on the road again. Go to work?"

"I've got to, Winnie. We all do. They've already assigned me to work on revamping the mining operations, especially coal and uranium for the power plants."

"Cool." Mom's face twisted, looking away. Out the back window, I could see Ron, who'd turned up on foot a couple of days before, putting up the clothesline she'd asked for, made of pencils and string. He seemed to be having trouble getting the sharp end of the pencils driven through the Zoyzia turf. I smirked. Wait'll he does. It's red clay underneath.

Dad said, "Listen, Winnie. I'll come down to see you guys this weekend. I'd like you to consider. . . ."

Mom said, "You fucking bastard! We don't need *you*."

After that, it was all shouting. Out in the backyard, I saw Ron trip and fall, then sit there beside his obstinate pencil, red in the face and puffing. There was a blue jay sitting in the locust tree at the top of the yard, watching him with interest, but I was imagining a hawk. Imagining a quick swoop, and then, Well, yes we *do* need him Mom. . . .

After lunch, Mom made me go out and help Ron put up the clothesline, but that only took a few minutes. I was saddling Lucky for my ride over to Mark's house, so we could go play Jupiter in the woods up the top of Greenacre, though I'd argued it was too summery for Jupiter, that it was still Venus season, that maybe we could ride Lucky as far as Italkor, or even Dorvo Valley, when Mr. Szomody came over to talk to Mom.

"A trained dog, Mrs. Brundage?" There was a dangerous glint in his eye, as he said, "Too valuable to be a boy's plaything. I represent a committee of your neighbors, Mrs. Brundage, and we've decided, for the good of the community. . . ."

That was as far as he got. Ron put his hand on Mr. Szomody's shoulder, then smiled and said, "You go ride on over to Mark's, Winnie. Have fun. I'll get the good of the community straightened right out."

The fear I saw in Mr. Szomody's eyes then was about the same as what I'd seen in my dad's eyes, the night he faced Ron for the first time.

I met Mark down at the Creek, and it turned out he didn't want to play

Venus or Jupiter. Instead, he had some stuff with him, stuff his father had made the day before.

"Look at this shit!" he said, proud as could be.

There was a sword, with a blade made from an old straight razor, radius cut into the tip so it looked just like the sword he drew for his Venusian character, Riterion of Citnalta. He was wearing it in a baldric made of leather and cardboard. The other thing was a crossbow of wood and springy rake tines, firing bolts made from bits of bicycle spoke.

"My father says you could kill a cat with this!"

"Midnight?"

Mark looked at me, eyes suddenly evasive. "He wants to, I think. Mommy and I said no." Then he turned and fired the thing up at the ant stump, actually hitting an ant, cutting it in two, gooey pieces falling to the ground, bolt disappearing completely into the rotten old wood.

"What else is he making?"

Long pause. "He took apart his .38. I guess he thinks he can mount it on the trunions of our old carbide cannon."

"Damn."

Mark said, "You hear we have to start going to school again next month?"

"That's what they say."

Another long pause, me picturing the coming confrontation between Ron and Dad, picturing myself in school again, sitting absurdly atop my enormous desk, Mrs. Lewis in her garish makeup shouting some lecture about verb conjugations, striding in miniature atop her own.

So much for the Shrinking.

So much for change.

I said, "This is the coolest thing that ever happened, but the adults are ruining it!"

Mark shrugged. "Anyway, TV is back."

Remember Gulliver, tied down by the Lilliputians? Gulliver, mishandled in Brobdingnag? Us, then? Just like that? No. Nothing like that in the here and now, oh so very real.

Over the weekend, Mark and I went camping, riding Lucky on out the two or three miles to the old abandoned industrial site we called Italkor, after the Venusian lost continent we'd made up to do service in place of the real world's Atlantis. It'd been a brickworks, and I'd moved here just in time to see them dynamite the old chimney, dropping it straight down into its own smoke.

The Italkorians had fought for control of the world, fought and lost, in a long-ago misty past very different from the present-day Venus of Alendar, Son of Venusia, who fought to prevent the evil Infinitarians from doing the same. Italkor itself was an erosional feature, two huge gullies separated by a narrow septum of woody ground, a little distance from the dilapidated old conveyor belt running up the red clay face of what the local boys called Dinky's Cliff, cliff face eighty feet high, hardly dinky at all, now, I realized, maybe a thousand feet or so. It was below a remaining structure, some kind of double silo Mark and I called the Twin Towers of Italkor.

We'd had a lot of fun here, climbing dirt cliffs full of swallow nests, battling carnivorous vines in the tangled forest all around, fighting with our wooden swords, though I knew my parents, at least, thought I was too old for that sort of thing. Mark liked Italkor best, though I always preferred Dorvo Valley myself.

We got off Lucky's back at the head of one of the gullies and stood looking out over the cliff as the shadows lengthened, days shorter than I liked this time of year, however unseasonably warm it'd gotten. The cliffs weren't very high, and I remember Mark had once tripped and fallen over, tumbling all the way to the bottom, unscathed but for a coating of dust and mud.

He'd screamed convincingly though, making me smile, though not enough to jump after him, just so I could scream convincingly myself.

Mark whistled softly. "What d'you think? A hundred feet?"

"More. Hey, why'n't you jump? I bet it'd be fun, just like last time!"

He grimaced. "Come on. Let's set up camp out on the Peninsula."

"Kurduhol?" That was a flat brown rock we'd decided covered an underground monastery where ancient Gulgol priests still survived from the heyday of Italkor, living through the Fall of the Starship because they were underground.

As we set up the tent Mark's father had made for us, in the deep shadows now covering the broad, warm expanse of Kurduhol, Mark said, "Did you listen to those guys on the *Today Show* yesterday?"

I walked Lucky over to a tree, no, make that a bush, and tied him with a long piece of twine I'd brought, giving him enough leeway that he could wander as much as he needed to, without getting away. "What, the ones who were arguing with Billy Graham about whether God made this happen or not?"

"Yeah. What'd you think?" He'd finished putting up the tent, tossing our bedrolls inside, and was unfolding the hibachi Bart'd made from a beer-can, some hanger strap, and a couple of bolts.

"Hell, I don't know. It sounded like they were arguing something from the plotline of *Brainwave*, you know? How's a 'Mysterious Galactic Force' different from 'God's Will'?" I started breaking up our piece of charcoal, chopping off bits with the shiny chrome axe that'd been attached to my toy fire truck. It wasn't much of an axe, not really sharp or anything, but it made a pretty good hammer, the charcoal making little clinker sounds as it broke.

"Why would God want us little?" Mark was taking the bits and throwing them in the hibachi, mixed with a few chopped-up matchheads.

"Why would a *Mysterious Galactic Force* want us little?"

He put the grating, cut from a piece of window screen, over the firewell, then took the igniter, some contraption made, I think, from flint and steel, old cigarette lighter parts maybe, and started clicking it over the grate, bright sparks falling down all over the coals. "I guess there was no explanation in that movie, either."

ssssssssFOOM!

"Jesus! You'll set the woods on fire!"

"Nah, it's dying down already. That was just the match heads. Get the steaks?"

I rummaged. "What movie did you mean, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*?"

"Yeah." He threw shiny slabs of meat over the licking flames, not waiting for the fire to turn to red coals. They sizzled right away.

"I don't think there was an explanation, not really. Just an 'atomic cloud' or some such. A Hitchcock macguffin. You read the book?"

"Nah. I don't even know if there *is* a book."

"Me neither." I dragged the Tupperware bowl of dog food over to Lucky, dry Ken-L-Ration mixed with a little juicy Kal-Kan, prying the lid off with a Popsicle stick I'd brought along, leaving him to eat so he wouldn't come sniffing over for our steaks.

We ate them, cross-legged on the rock, off dishes my sister screeched about my taking, using razor slivers Mark's father had made into knives, watching the sky grow dark, the stars twinkle into being, shooting the shit, wishing for I don't know what.

At some point, full, loving the night and the breeze, I said, "You know, it's already like it never happened. We'll go back to school, they'll tear down our old houses and build little houses for everyone, little cars, little planes, little trains. . . ."

"Little TVs," Mark said, rubbing his full belly.

"Yeah. The only change is, the world will be ten times bigger."

I could see Mark's dark eyes, beady glints on the edge of night. "Maybe it really is," he said.

"Bigger? What about gravity?" Somewhere far away, I heard an owl hoot, saw Mark glance over at his crossbow, loaded and cocked. "Ah, hell," he said. "Let's turn in."

In a dream, we who shrank went on with our lives. I grew up, married Shelly, who was just a skinny girl who would sometimes talk to me after class, had kids, grew old, died, and it never mattered how big the world was, or how little and insignificant we were.

But then I awoke suddenly, unaccountably dizzy, lying naked atop my bedroll, though I'd gone to sleep, I thought, still dressed in my doll clothes, lying on my back, bareass in the breeze, looking up at a pattern of sunlight playing on the softly stirring tent material, forty, maybe fifty feet overhead.

Still vaguely remembering the dream, especially the parts where I got to be in bed with skinny Shelly, I heard myself whisper, "Oh, *shit*. . . ."

I sat up, cloth coarse as burlap crumpling under my ass, hugged my knees for a second, then stood, looking around. Like a circus tent. Like I'm under the goddamn Big Top. Mark, naked as me, dimples showing on his asscheeks, was standing by the tent flap, which we'd closed when we retired, holding it open just a tiny bit, peering out into bright daylight.

When I was close behind, I heard him whispering, "I didn't mean it. I didn't really mean it. . . ."

I pushed him out of the way, shoving through the flap, which was heavy as a theatrical curtain, took one step outside, suddenly stood still. Maybe a dozen feet away, also standing still, seeming to look right at me, was a little black ant, antennae waving gently, eyes glinting like cut crystal in the sunshine. A little black ant the size of a housecat.

I turned slowly, looking at Mark, whose face was wet with tears. "I didn't mean it," he said.

The ant's feet started making complex popping and clicking noises as it turned and began walking away, weaving from side to side, like it was lost. "Jesus, Mark. I guess now Midnight would be the size of a dinosaur, huh?" That made me look at where Lucky had been tied, the night before. Gone. The piece of twine, coiled like a ship's hawser, ended in a spray of frayed fiber.

"Chewed through in the night I expect. Maybe he'll come back."

Mark stepped back into the tent, almost recoiling. "He'll eat us!"

"Maybe so." I followed him in, wondering if Lucky would know me now, reduced ten times yet again. I kneeled by Mark's crossbow, the size of an arbalest now, picked up a bolt the size of a spear and hefted it. Not *too* heavy, I guess.

Looking down at me, Mark, very pale, said, "We're in trouble, aren't we?"

I grinned, feeling sick to my stomach. "No shit, Sherlock!"

It took us about a week to walk all the long way back from Italkor. I'm not really sure how long it took; I lost track of the days, though Mark guessed it must be something like two-hundred-fifty miles that we had to cover. We never saw hide nor hair of Lucky again. Just as well. What would he be now? A hundred feet high at the shoulder? More?

I hope he came through this okay, somehow.

I hope he's not lonely and afraid.

At some point, we cowered in the shadows of the curb, not wanting to cross any more blacktop, knowing we had to, at the intersection of Hyl-Ton Avenue and Fourth Street, trying to make up our minds whether to head for Greenacre Drive or Staggs Court. Afraid to separate, of course. Just plain afraid.

Mark sat with his back to the cool concrete of the curbstone, staring out across the street, through the heat haze rising off the blacktop, making the faraway houses seem to wriggle. Holding a hand gently against his scalp laceration, he whispered, "Damned hot out there. Hot like summer." One side of his face was covered with dried blood. Blood had splashed down onto his chest, dried in drips down his back.

"Worse," I said, voice peculiarly hoarse. We weren't naked, of course. We'd been smart enough to make what clothes we could before leaving the enormous tent on Kurduhol, making things like ponchos, things like booties, tying everything up with threads we'd pulled loose. I kept wishing we'd made hats of some kind. We both had really black hair that soaked up the heat of the sun, almost as well as the road tar.

We'd also been smart enough to take two crossbow bolts apiece, walking with them like ski poles at first. Now, we had one left between us, the one I was holding.

Mark looked down at his shaking hands, at all the little cuts there, at big purple and green bruises on his forearms. "Jesus, Winnie! That robin almost got us. . . ."

I looked up at the sky quickly. There was a dot, high up, moving slowly, who knows what? "Yeah. And I guess it *would* have if you hadn't got your

bolt in its eye." I'd been on my back, poking up at it with my own little spear, bike spoke metal clicking against that horrible yellow beak, ruddy black eyes right out of a nightmare far above, and the sonofabitch had *thrown* the damned thing.

He looked up at me, skin seeming almost green. "I bet that hurt, huh?"

I nodded. Then I said, "Let's go to your house. There's nothing at mine, just my mom, my sisters, that fucking drunk Ron. . . ." Maybe my dad, maybe not.

He seemed to shrink back into the shadows.

I reached out my hand to help him up. "Come on. If anybody knows what to do next, it'll be your father."

He whispered. "It's so hot out there. . . ."

"You know the owls'll get us, if we wait for dark."

"Or the bats."

"Yeah." Funny thing, what turned out to be dangerous. I was picturing old movies, old books, spiders, ants, giant bees. I don't think we ever saw a spider with a body more than two feet across, though I suppose there must be some around, even in northern Virginia. It turns out the stuff inside a spider tastes a lot like crabmeat or lobster, and that's what we ate all the way home, glad we'd taken bits of charcoal along in a bag, and the friction tips off our kitchen matchheads.

Birds, on the other hand . . . a robin fifty feet tall . . . Jesus!

"Come on," I said. "We need to get over to the other side and start looking for a hidey hole before dark. It can't be much before three now."

Sudden fear. "I'm unarmed!"

I held out my bolt. "Here. You're the one knows how to use it."

He took the thing, hefting it, a bit of color coming back into his scabby face. Finally, he stood, trying to grin his best wry grin. "Who'd've thought being able to throw a football would mean I could throw a spear?"

"Whodathunkit. Right." I'd never thrown a football in my life, despite all my dad's angry browbeating. Mark made a point of being good at sports, being able to beat other boys at their own game, Little League one season, Pop Warner the other.

I turned and walked out into the heat of the road, not looking up, knowing he'd follow.

It took us another three days to make our way down Hyl-Ton Avenue, then up the long, tiresome slope of Greenacre Drive. At first, we tried to stay in the long grass of the lawns, grass that hadn't been mowed for months now, grass still growing in the false summer of the post-Shrink world, hoping it'd hide us from the birds, but there was danger in the grass too. Not so much bugs, which tended to be little and fragile, or which, like beetles and bumblebees, were bigger, but didn't seem to care what we were, as the sort of things that moviemakers and storytellers don't think about.

I was glad we'd made more spears, spears made from twigs cut and sharpened with the point of our last crossbow bolt, but that field mouse almost killed us anyway, tan, fast, smart, and the size of an elephant.

It was hot as hell now, but I still shivered, remembering the sound its teeth had made, cracking the haft of my spear. Mark got the tip of the bolt

poking into its eye and it ran right off, leaving us to our heaving breaths, to an episode of puking and crying. After that, we kept to the shadows of the gutter, moving fast, watching for birds, going motionless when we needed to.

There was a copperhead in the street once, a thousand feet long maybe, but all it wanted to do was get off the hot blacktop.

It was late afternoon when we went up the slope of the downhill neighbor's driveway, crossed the sidewalk quick as we could and hid, crouching in the long grass of the lawn, looking toward the house. Midnight lay curled on the stoop, sound asleep in the sun, eyes shut, nose tucked under the tip of her tail.

I whispered, "Wasn't she in the basement?"

Nothing. I looked at Mark. He was staring at the cat.

"Mark?"

"She used to chase bugs a lot. Crickets. Grasshoppers. I don't think she ever brought home a mouse or a bird or anything like that. She was mostly an indoor cat." Whispered very softly, as if to himself.

"I guess you'd be about the size of a nice fat cricket, huh, Markie?"

He hissed: "Shut up!"

"Come on, Mark. I bet our voices are so teeny and high-pitched not even a kittycat could hear us."

"The mouse did."

A hoarse voice suddenly rasped, "*Boys!*" Not quite in a whisper, but low.

Mark spun, wrenching around, looking here, looking there. "*Daddy!*" He got up and ran, dropping his spear and the last crossbow bolt. Up on the porch, Midnight awoke suddenly, blinking in the sun, looking our way, staring suspiciously, peering close, freezing my blood.

After a minute or so, she laid her head down again, recurled her tail, and seemed to drift off. I got up slowly, and walked over to one of the little mulberry bushes lining the edge of the Paloverdis' lawn, making sure to take Mark's bolt and spear, as well as my own. In the deep shadows under the bush, Bart was hugging his son, the first time I'd ever seen the two of them touch one another.

Mr. Paloverdi grinned as I walked up. "Hey, you both made it! I figured you were dead over in that old construction site."

I hefted the last bolt. "You kind of saved us."

He looked down at Mark. "I bet you never thought your old bike'd come in so handy!"

No. I guess not.

Bart said, "Come on. Let's go around back. I'll show you where we're staying. And it's almost time for supper." He gave Mark another wrenching squeeze. "Jeez, it's good to see you, kid!"

We walked back along the property line, keeping the row of mulberry bushes between us and the cat, keeping to the shadows, and I remembered Bart had planted these things because he'd had some scheme that involved growing silkworms and making money selling the raw silk. He was always coming up with stuff like that, stuff that never panned out, I guess because he was only a draftsman, and his wife had to work as a secretary for them to make ends meet, one of the few moms who did. My

mom quit work when I was born, and didn't go back to it 'til she kicked Dad out.

Once we had the house between us and Midnight, we cut diagonally through the grass and then followed the foundation around the corner to the backyard, where the Paloverdis' outboard motorboat was upended on cinder blocks, ready for winter, the motor itself long ago detached and taken down to the basement.

In the cool darkness under the boat, where the grass was stunted and dying from being in the shade all day, was one of Bart's tents, just like the one we'd left in Italkor, huge now, and covered over with a fine mesh of shiny cloth.

"Watch it, Mark. Don't touch!"

Up by the top of the tent, something sparkled and sizzled, and we got a sudden whiff of roasting seafood. "What that?" I asked.

Bart grinned. "It's the inside of my bugzapper!"

"Wow."

He walked us around the side, where I could see an extension cord and some kind of toggle switch, shiny chrome switch about four feet high. Bart threw his weight on the lever, grunting until it went *clack* as it shifted. "There. We can go in now." He held a swath of mesh aside for us, so we could go through the tentflap. It was dark in there.

"Hang on, boys. Stand still and don't touch anything 'til I get the power back on."

Clack.

There was a sudden smell of burning dust, then light came on in the tent, lights hanging high, bits of glass, with little glowing wires inside. Standing by a second switch, seeing my look, Bart smiled. "You know what those are?"

I shook my head.

"Stuff from inside my old radio. I almost forgot about them. But I remembered. I always remember, don't I, Mark?"

Mark was looking around, looking into the shadows.

"Hey! Dinner!" Bart walked over to what looked like an old hotplate, full of pride, full of strength, making me wonder how he'd managed to get it out here, sans machines or magic. There was a ceramic bin, some former piece of kitchenware I guess, to one side of the stove, in it, an enormous glob of stale, gray hamburger. It smelled good when it started to sizzle, though.

I said, "How long you think the power's going to last, now that everybody's . . ."

He shrugged. "As long as it lasts. Until the generators fail, or run out of fuel, or storms bring the power lines down. I'll deal with it when it happens. Not before."

I tried to imagine my dad saying something like that. Couldn't.

Mark said, "Daddy?"

"What?" Busy with the burgers, flipping them with a sliver of metal.

"Why're you living outside?"

He shrugged again. "It was hard getting out of the house. I don't want to be trapped in there if we shrink again some night."

Shrink again. . . . Jesus.

Mark said, "Where's Mommy?"

Silence, the two of them staring at each other. Then Bart said, "Inside kitty."

Long, long gape.

"I'm sorry, Mark. She just wouldn't listen." Mark turned away, wrapping his arms around himself, then walked into the far shadows and sat down. Go over to him? Yes? No? I found myself closing my ears to the sounds he was making, turning to look back at his father, who'd continued to cook.

He said, "Don't worry, Winnie. I'll look after you both, no matter what happens. We'll be all right. You'll see."

Will I? I said, "You're cooler than I ever realized, Mr. Paloverdi."

He eyed me, maybe trying to figure out exactly what I meant. "Call me Bart."

I said, "My dad always said you were just a Wop greaseball."

Another look, sour this time. "Your dad's a horse's ass."

I said, "Is? Or was?"

A little shadow in his eyes. "Sorry." Then, "Hey, you hungry? You want a burger? Meat's a little fibrous, but it still tastes the same."

I think he could see my mouth start to water, thinking about hamburger, after ten days eating roasted spiderguts.

"Mark?"

Nothing. Those noises from the shadows.

Bart said, "Ah, hell. Let's eat, Winnie. This is the way it is, no matter what we want."

I nodded, taking a chip of wood with my steamy burger on it, and some twigs I guess were meant to be chopsticks. It got dark out while we were eating, and I think I heard the cat stooging around outside the boat. Maybe she could smell the bits of cooking meat? Maybe she was still hopping for a little soft canned catfood or something. . . .

Rising from the haze of an indistinct dream, something about W. Somerset Maugham, maybe just the way my mother made fun of his name, I remember thinking, We're insect warriors now. The things in the stories will mean something, will show us the way, will . . .

Screaming. Faraway screaming.

I just lay there, naked again, looking up at the shadowy tent material, thinking it was so far away it looked like the sky. Dim, grainy sky, sky without clouds, billowing in remote, gentle folds. And the tent pole, I thought, looks like the Washington Monument. Five hundred feet tall. Maybe a little more?

And still that faraway screaming.

That'd be Mark, I guess.

Scream trailing away to a sob.

Muttering, maybe something about Mommy, maybe not. I can't tell. My own shortness of breath. I'm afraid to sit up and look. I sat up anyway; looked anyway. Maybe a thousand yards from me, halfway to the tent flap, was a dead black ant, black ant cut in two by a huge silver blade, one

of Bart's cooking tools, smeared with antgoo now, instead of hamburger grease.

It's a little black ant, I thought. What do they call those? Minims? So small it could get through the mesh of the bugzapper without touching anything. I got up and walked toward it, and when I got close I could see it wasn't a tenth of an inch long. No, more like ten feet.

How big's that make me? One-twentieth of an inch? In the distance I could hear Mark calling out. Couldn't make out his words. My name? Daddy? God? I dunno. Christ, I feel weird.

I could see Bart's tiny figure standing in the tentflap, outlined naked against daylight, just the way I'd seen Mark standing when I awoke atop Kurduhol, in the mountains of Italkor. What's he seeing? I wondered.

He was still transfixed, when I walked up behind him, just as his son had been. I stood beside him, flinching away, not wanting to look, forcing myself.

"Jesus!"

The mantis's great green head turned and tilted, moving with a distant sound of mechanical gears and screeching metal parts, bug eyes seeming to look right at me, making me try to shrink yet again, 'til I was too small for it to see.

Bart glanced over at me, and whispered, "Easy, Winnie. I don't think it can get through the bugzapper, but I'd rather not find out. Anyway, we can't go outside until it leaves."

I swallowed, nodding, wondering if it could see a movement that little, or hear the faint cluck of my dry, terrified throat. "It's as big as the Empire State Building!"

Bart said, "Nah, three-, maybe four-hundred feet, tops."

Something loomed immense and black out in the yard beyond the mantis, towering in the brilliant sunshine over grass stalks hundreds of feet high. Something big enough to blot out the sun, something a mile or more long maybe, something the size of a mountain, something with fifty-foot green eyes looking down at our little tableau.

The mantis's head creaked around, looking up at it, then it froze, staring. The black thing seemed to hunker down a bit, taking its shadow off the mantis, creeping closer.

Bart whispered, "Midnight. Good kitty. . . ."

Somewhere behind us, Mark started to howl again, but the mantis, in fear for its life, kept its attention on the cat's enormous eyes. If Midnight looks away, I thought, the mantis will run. And we're *way* too small to interest a cat.

Bart looked over his shoulder, and when I turned, I could see Mark coming toward us, still over a half-mile away. Walking toward us and yelling something, I don't know what. Sudden thunder and earthquake shivering from outside. When I looked again, the cat and mantis were both gone.

"Damn."

Bart said, "Give 'em a while, then we'll try to get outside and see what's what."

I thought, *Outside?* Felt my asshole clench. Those little spiders we ate? Now they'll be twenty feet across. More. Big enough. . . .

Bart turned and stared at Mark. "What is it they call him in school?" "Pillow."

"That pissed me off."

At him? I said, "Yeah, well. They call me 'Whiny Winnie.'"

He grinned at me. "Called, Winnie. *Called*. But you're alive, and they're all most likely bugshit by now."

I said, "What's going to happen to us, Bart?"

He shrugged, "Who knows? Starzl, maybe?"

I felt a sudden warmth in my heart when he said that. It was the sort of thing I liked to hear my father say, on those long-ago days when we walked alone together in the woods. Telling my dad all about the DC Comic I was reading, with the story about the world inside an atom, a world the comic-book writers called Starzl.

He'd laughed, and told me all about a long-gone writer named R.F. Starzl, in a magazine he'd gotten from his own dad, and a story published in 1919, called "Out of the Sub-Universe."

It made me feel happy, remembering that day, wondering what I'd remember about this one. When and if. Suddenly cold.

On our march to the refrigerator, we walked through the cool green cathedral of the lawn, so small now that even the bugs didn't see us. The stalks of grass rose overhead, thicker than giant redwoods, the ones with seed pods waving two miles and more up in the sky, shorter, broader greener blades, maybe half that, all but blotting out the sun.

Far overhead, the size of a pteranodon, a featherwing beetle, smallest of the insects, drifted along on its cushion of air, wings a throbbing blur, beyond it patches of blue sky in the green veil. That, and the wall of the house, rising infinitely, disappearing in the mist.

What's a two-story Cape Cod-style house, thirty feet tall to the peak of the roof? Thirteen, almost fourteen miles? Overnight, while we slept, the refrigerator had gotten too far away. And so had the relative safety of the boat, tent, and bugzapper.

We were naked now. Naked and barefoot, sunburned, feet bleeding from a hundred little cuts. Sharp stuff in the dirt. Stuff sharp as glass. Bart'd made us new clothes, ponchos and booties for people a twentieth of an inch tall. And we'd taken the chopsticks he'd made for our bug-size selves as weapons, because there were things, you see, that'd want to eat mite-size men as well.

Now? Now that we're mote size?

Maybe not.

Or maybe he's just giving up.

A couple of dozen yards away, by the base of a clump of crabgrass as vast and gloomy as Sherwood Forest, a herd of stumpy, cartoonish things the size and shape of angular, segmented cows were grazing on an enormous dusty curl of something or other, something like a wood shaving, but looking more like leather.

Walking ahead of me, arm around his son's shoulders, Bart said, "See, Mark? Those things are tardigrades. Like the dust mites I told you lived on our sofa!"

Mark said nothing. Didn't even look, kept plodding, leaving little dark footprints in the dust. Spots of blood.

Where the hell are we going?

My stomach growled.

I called out, "What's that they're eating, Bart?"

He glanced at me, grinned, took his arm off Mark and dropped back beside me. "It's probably a piece of my skin, shed the last time I mowed the lawn."

"Could we eat it too?" Wry face. "Oh, it'd probably be like wood! Besides . . ."

Yeah. Right.

He said, "I keep hoping we'll find a spider paralyzed by a digger wasp. It'd still be alive and fresh. We could eat the spider and the wasp egg too."

There was something false behind his bright eyes and smile now. I said, "I hope you're right. I'm so hungry I'm dizzy."

His face got serious and he looked away, looking at Mark for a minute, then he said, "You're being pretty brave about this, Winnie."

I shrugged.

He said, "I thought I taught Mark all about being brave."

Though I was sure he could hear us, Mark didn't pause, turn back, look, or even cock an ear to show he was listening. All he did was walk, forward into the gloom of the lawn.

I said, "Being brave's not something you can teach someone, Bart. My dad didn't seem to know that either. You can't teach it, you can't scare it into someone, you can't beat it into them. Either they have it or they don't. Bravery isn't about not being afraid, Bart. It's about being honest. All you taught Mark was about hiding his feelings."

He gave me a long look, light behind his eyes fading, then went forward and walked with Mark again.

Jesus, I thought. What difference does *any* of this make *now*?

Maybe none. Maybe a lot.

What happens next?

Do I care?

Here we are, in the middle of the greatest adventure of all, finally an adventure that *really* happens, and . . . nothing. We'll just die. Just the way we would've all along, as if none of it had *ever* happened.

And nothing more to do but walk until that time comes.

So . . . we staggered along, walking across an endless, lumpy gray plain, foot-high lumps like frozen bubbles, like frozen dishwater froth, like frozen Coke foam. Grape Coke. That's what I remembered. Mark and I at the Drug Fair soda fountain, ordering our Cokes flavored with whatever, cherry of course, but then grape, the lime of a Lime Rickee, chocolate syrup, vanilla. I always liked grape best, grape making the Coke foam turn a flat ugly gray.

Now, in the fullness of time, as we used to say, not knowing what that really meant, the sky was gray overhead as well, a dim, misty gray, featureless, though if you stood and watched for a while, you'd swear you could make out shapes in the mist. Things. Faces. Phantasms. The last

time I'd pointed one out to Bart, he hadn't even looked, much less answered.

Walk on.

Just walk on.

From nowhere to nowhere.

It'd been three or four days since the last time we'd seen anything at all, and I was glad. The burns on my skin were trying to heal, burns from where that blob had gotten on me, peely burns, regular skin now surrounding big, shiny reddish-pink patches. Bart thought it was an amoeba, and he thought the little green "bugs" we saw everywhere were euglenas, the pink ones paramacia. Teeny-tiny slipper things.

What're the bubbles, Bart? Molecules?

Nah. We're still way too big for that.

Still, they buzz when you touch 'em.

Ah, who gives a shit? Come on. Let's walk.

Where to, Bart? I'm so hungry.

Mark never said a word, just walked on, living on his fat, eyes dark, beady, knowing . . . I don't know. Something. Maybe just knowing I'd die first, then his father, and that each time he'd have something to eat.

Stop it.

You don't know what he's thinking.

So hungry. Dizzy. Tired.

Bart stopped, stretching with his hands on the small of his back, arching, looking up, squinting into the mist, where something swirled, some huge, dark shadow. Then he said, "I'm sorry, boys. I just don't know what to do next."

Mark looked at him, face still, eyes expressionless. Then a nod, then looking away. And just a trace of a smile on his face? Maybe a smile of satisfaction. *Finally*, Mark? Is it what you've waited for all your life?

I said, "Don't feel bad. You kept us alive a long time, Bart." It turns out, even when you're too small for a featherwing beetle to see, too small for a dust mite to notice, there are still things that will try to eat you. Bart Paloverdi had bested them all, and he'd been the one who had scraped the amoeba off me, bit by bit, burning the shit out of his own hands in the process.

Now, he said, "Next time we shrink, we'll be small enough for the paramacia to hunt, so small we'll be swimming in the gluey water film that covers every surface. The next time after that, I think we'll be too small to breathe."

"You think it'll just go on?"

He shrugged. "Why not? I mean it's not like we know *why* or anything."

We'd talked about that a lot, back when we were just mite-sized, when it was obvious we were in a quickening cycle of shrink and shrink again. But "why" is always a guessing game without end, frustrating science, frustrating religion.

"Even after we're dead?"

Another shrug. "No point worrying about that, is there?"

Then, golden mist gathering around us.

Golden fire.

The bubbles growing, the surface beneath our feet starting to expand, pulling us apart. Bart surged forward, grabbing Mark's hand, reaching out for me. "Hang on, boys! We'll go together!"

I pulled back, watching them shrink.

Turned away and fell headlong into the golden light, all alone.

Turned and spun, spun down through the golden mist, voices whispering, visions appearing and disappearing, one after the other, as if from Coleridge's golden dream. Measureless caverns. That sunless sea. Flashing eyes. Floating hair.

I saw Mark walking away, triumphant. Going to Larry's house. Larry knows girls, Winnie. You don't. Her name was Susie, wasn't it, Mark?

There was a man in a white spacesuit, floating free above the limb of the Earth. C'mon in. Ed. But the man caught fire and burned and burned. Then another man, standing on a starship's bridge, face working, grimacing, as if in a nightmare. My ship. My ship. A third man, standing on the Moon, saluting a stiff American flag.

Other schools. Other friends. Not the same.

We came in peace. Signed by another man with a sullen frog-jowl face. Put it all away. We don't need this. Hippie dreams making us lose our glorious war.

I am not a crook.

In the background, marching along like the ringwraiths they really were, a black man shot dead, a rabbit-faced white man, also shot dead, an angry old racist, shot into a wheelchair.

Who am I? Where am I going? And why?

That very odd girl with the long blond hair and ever-so-startling strange blue eyes, standing naked before me in the bedroom I'd made from a blind hallway, one dark night in my mother's ratty little post-divorce apartment. A quick smile, then she stepped past me. I turned and watched, stunned by the view, as she crawled up the length of my childhood bed, stood hollow and unthinking as she rolled on her back and beckoned me to her.

Marry me, I thought. Marry me and we'll have beautiful children together, you and I, forever.

Rollout. A glorious white-winged spacecraft, named for the grimacing actor's starship. I saw it burn, once, twice. That beautiful flower blossoming in the sky over Florida. That hypnotic stream of golden light, disintegrating in the sky over Texas. My ship. My ship. And my golden dream.

Lost. All of it lost. Ten years of forever, and the beautiful children of madness.

An old actor, Mr. Death Valley Days himself, intoning, Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall. . . . Who? What? A bald guy with a birthmark?

Then a fat guy, triumphant, getting a blowjob in a hallway.

Then a moron winning in a courtroom.

Leadership.

An airplane sliding into a building, once, twice, and through and through, that vorpal sword, that snicker-snack. . . .

Finally, Tudor Turtle's voice calling me, and I opened my eyes very slowly indeed. They were gummy and I felt sick, sick like I had the flu,

and *tired*, tireder than I'd ever felt before. When I rolled over in bed, the damp sheets clung to me, releasing a smell of old, sick sweat, and there were unfamiliar aches, aches in my elbows and knees, shoulders and hips.

Jesus. What's wrong with me?

There was bright light flooding the room, and I thought, I'm sick. I've overslept and I'll be late for school. Maybe Mom. . . .

Bang. I jerked my head up and caught a quick glimpse of a blue jay fluttering wildly as it rebounded from my dirty window, fluttering briefly against a bright blue sky.

Hm. Dead cactus plants missing. There was a odd, needle-sharp pain in my neck from moving quickly like that. When I sat up in bed, I looked down at myself. Naked? What happened to my underwear? Quick pulse of alarm. I turned, more slowly this time, wanting to look at the poodle-shaped lamp, terrified it'd be far, far away, terrified it'd be close.

Gone.

I sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at my fat belly, wondering where all the hair had come from, then looked around the room at unfamiliar furniture. Am I crazy then?

I thought about a TV program they'd showed us at school, where a man was strapped down, electrodes glued here and there, a rubber wedge shoved in his mouth and, *Flame on!* He'd shivered and shivered, foam appearing at the corners of his mouth, bubbling around the mouthpiece, eyes rolled back all white-on-white.

Next, they showed a smiling man. *Well*, they said. He's well and ready to go home, thanks to the miracle of electroshock therapy.

A scrap of color caught my eye, a scrap of purple cloth protruding from under the lid of a white wicker hamper in one corner of the room. I got up, slowly, carefully, not challenging the pain, reached down and pulled it free. A pair of women's underwear, barely a scrap at all, a crotchpiece connected at each end to a stretchy waistband.

Mom?

No.

I'd seen my mother's underwear, had seen my mother in it, walking carelessly around the house like I was still a little boy, with no feelings of my own. Nothing like this. Never. This is a whore's underwear, a whore in a book. But I thought about my mom, Mom and Ron, feeling sicker by the second.

Crazy.

No. This isn't my world. It's . . .

How had the movie ended? Right. He wins the fight with the spider, grows smaller, then smaller still, until he can walk out through the little holes in the window screen, out into the world, live free, die free, all the same, unafraid. Nothing. I remembered a story I'd read then, about another man who shrank and fought spiders. How had that one ended? In a microworld.

I felt the terror surge out of me as I tucked the underpants back in the hamper. Right. I've awakened in the microworld. Not Starzl maybe, but the adventure continues.

And I've got to pee.

Outside the bedroom door was a hallway just like the hallway in my parents' house, though the carpet was pale brown, where my parents had had a rich blue-green. My parents' bedroom. But the door to the left, which should've opened on my room, showed a room with a desk, a file cabinet, tall bookcases. On the desk was a small TV set; next to it, a gray plastic box; in front of it, a rather flat-looking portable typewriter. Odd. In my sisters' room, opposite the bathroom door, was what looked like stuff from a gymnasium. A treadmill, anyway, and a thing with a hodge-podge of cables and handles. Odder still.

I went in the bathroom and flipped on the light.

There was a mirror, of course.

And there I stood. Shaking. Peeing on the floor. Watching a white-haired old man, shaking and peeing on the floor.

I stopped myself, clenching hard, and turned away, unrolling toilet paper to wipe up the puddle, making myself finish in the commode before I turned back to look again. Hmm. Maybe not so old? The white hair was tricky. Mom would have white hair if she didn't dye it black, and she was only thirty-four. Older than that, though. A lot older. Maybe younger than Grandma Kitty, whose hair was dyed red? Grandma Kitty, I remembered, was something like sixty-five.

Fifty, I decided. The old man was somewhere near fifty. In my reflection, I looked scared. Not scared. Spooked. All right. Something to do with the Shrinking, maybe. But I was only fourteen years old. Remember that.

I walked naked into the huge kitchen, kitchen full of things I didn't recognize, along with the familiar-looking black stove and refrigerator, though my parents' appliances and everyone else's I knew had always been white. There was a boxy thing with a door, that, when I opened it, showed a turntable and a light bulb. An Easy Bake Oven? In a real kitchen?

The living room, also too large, with so much odd, woody-looking furniture, had a big, flat TV screen way too wide for its height, and some black boxes with glowing displays. Numbers in blue. A green light here. A red one there. Lots of wires hanging down behind. Meaningless.

There was a fireplace; on the mantelpiece, a row of brightly colored books. The name on the spine of the first one. . . . I felt my breath grow short, come hard, looked quickly down the row, first to last. No. Impossible.

Outside the window was the street, lit by bright yellow sunshine under a cloudless blue sky, and, just as I looked, a little black car, a tiny car really, maybe half the size of my dad's 1959 Chevy Biscayne, pulled into the driveway, a blond woman behind the wheel.

I pulled in a little breath of air, fighting to stay on my feet, reeling, fighting off walls of gray faint.

No, not the beautiful blond madwoman with the startling blue eyes.

Another woman. A woman I'd met much, much later.

I felt the memories come flooding back, clicking into place one by one, and, with them, the stark realization that I'd lived happily ever after.

After all. ○

THE CATCH

Kage Baker

Kage Baker's Hugo- and Nebula-finalist, "The Empress of Mars," appeared in our July 2003 issue. Her next novel, *The Life of the World to Come*, will be out from Tor next month, and continues the adventures of the cyborg operatives of Dr. Zeus Incorporated.

The barn stands high in the middle of back-country nowhere, shimmering in summer heat. It's an old barn, empty a long time, and its broad planks are silvered. Nothing much around it but yellow hills and red rock.

Long ago, somebody painted it with a mural. Still visible along its broad wall are the blobs representing massed crowds, the green diamond of a baseball park, and the primitive-heroic figure of an outfielder leaping, glove raised high. His cartoon eyes are wide and happy. The ball, radiating black lines of force, is sailing into his glove. Above him is painted the legend:

WHAT A CATCH! And, in smaller letters below it:

1951, The Golden Year!

The old highway snakes just below the barn, where once the mural must have edified a long cavalcade of DeSotos, Packards, and Oldsmobiles. But the old road is white and empty now, with thistles pushing through its cracks. The new highway runs straight across the plain below.

Down on the new highway, eighteen-wheeler rigs hurtle through, roaring like locomotives, and they are the only things to disturb the vast silence. The circling hawk makes no sound. The cottonwood trees by the edge of the dry stream are silent, too, not a rustle or a creak along the whole row; but they do cast a thin gray shade, and the men waiting in the Volkswagen Bug are grateful for that.

They might be two cops on stakeout. They aren't. Not exactly.

"Are you going to tell me why we're sitting here, now?" asks the younger man, finishing his candy bar.

His name is Clete. The older man's name is Porfirio.

The older man shifts in his seat and looks askance at his partner. He

doesn't approve of getting stoned on the job. But he shrugs, checks his weapon, settles into the most comfortable position he can find.

He points through the dusty windshield at the barn. "See up there? June 30, 1958, family of five killed. '46 Plymouth Club Coupe. Driver lost control of the car and went off the edge of the road. Car rolled seventy meters down that hill and hit the rocks, right there. Gas tank blew. Mr. and Mrs. William T. Ross of Visalia, California, identified from dental records. Kids didn't have any dental records. No relatives to identify bodies.

"Articles in the local and Visalia papers, grave with the whole family's names and dates on one marker in a cemetery in Visalia. Some blackening on the rocks up there. That's all there is to show it ever happened."

"Okay," says the younger man, nodding thoughtfully. "No witnesses, right?"

"That's right."

"The accident happened on a lonely road, and state troopers or whoever found the wreck after the fact?"

"Yeah."

"And the bodies were so badly burned they all went in one grave?" Clete looks pleased with himself. "So . . . forensic medicine being what it was in 1958, maybe there weren't five bodies in the car after all? Maybe one of the kids was thrown clear on the way down the hill? And if there was *somebody* in the future going through historical records, looking for incidents where children vanished without a trace, this might draw their attention, right?"

"It might," agrees Porfirio.

"So the Company sent an operative to see if any survivors could be salvaged," says Clete. "Okay, that's standard Company procedure. The Company took one of the kids alive, and he became an operative. So why are we here?"

Porfirio sighs, watching the barn.

"Because the kid didn't become an operative," he says. "He became a problem."

1958. Bobby Ross, all-American boy, was ten years old, and he loved baseball and cowboy movies and riding his bicycle. All-American boys get bored on long trips. Bobby got bored. He was leaning out the window of his parents' car when he saw the baseball mural on the side of the barn.

"Hey, look!" he yelled, and leaned *way* out the window to see better. He slipped.

"Jesus Christ!" screamed his mom, and lunging into the back she tried to grab the seat of his pants. She collided with his dad's arm. His dad cursed; the car swerved. Bobby felt himself gripped, briefly, and then all his mom had was one of his sneakers, and then the sneaker came off his foot. Bobby flew from the car just as it went over the edge of the road.

He remembered afterward standing there, clutching his broken arm, staring down the hill at the fire, and the pavement was hot as fire too on his sneakerless foot. His mind seemed to be stuck in a little circular track. He was really hurt bad, so what he had to do now was run to his

mom and dad, who would yell at him and drive him to Dr. Werts, and he'd have to sit in the cool green waiting room that smelled scarily of rubbing alcohol and look at dumb *Humpty Dumpty Magazine* until the doctor made everything all right again.

But that wasn't going to happen now, because . . .

But he was really hurt bad, so he needed to run to his mom and dad—

But he couldn't do that ever again, because—

But he was really hurt bad—

His mind just went round and round like that, until the spacemen came for him.

They wore silver suits, and they said "Greetings, Earth Boy; we have come to rescue you and take you to Mars," but they looked just like ordinary people and in fact gave Bobby the impression they were embarrassed. Their space ship was real enough, though. They carried Bobby into it on a stretcher and took off, and a space doctor fixed his broken arm, and he was given space soda pop to drink, and he never even noticed that the silver ship had risen clear of the hillside, one step ahead of the state troopers, until he looked out and saw the curve of the Earth. He'd been lifted from history, as neatly as a fly ball smacking into an outfielder's mitt.

The spacemen didn't take Bobby Ross to Mars, though. It turned out to be some place in Australia. But it might just as well have been Mars.

Because, instead of starting fifth grade, and then going on to high school, and getting interested in girls, and winning a baseball scholarship, and being drafted, and blown to pieces in Viet Nam—Bobby Ross became an immortal.

"Well, that happened to all of us," says Clete, shifting restively. "One way or another. Except I've never heard of the Company recruiting a kid as old as ten."

"That's right." Keeping his eyes on the barn, Porfirio reaches into the back seat and gropes in a cooler half-full of rapidly melting ice. He finds and draws out a bottle of soda. "So what does that tell you?"

Clete considers the problem. "Well, everybody knows you can't work the immortality process on somebody that old. You hear rumors, you know, like when the Company was starting out, that there were problems with some of the first test cases—" He stops himself and turns to stare at Porfirio. Porfirio meets his gaze but says nothing, twisting the top off his soda bottle.

"*This* guy was one of the test cases!" Clete exclaims. "And the Company didn't have the immortality process completely figured out yet, so they made a mistake?"

Several mistakes had been made with Bobby Ross.

The first, of course, was that he was indeed too old to be made immortal. If two-year-old Patty or even five-year-old Jimmy had survived the crash, the process might have been worked successfully on them. Seat belts not having been invented in 1946, however, the Company had only Bobby with whom to work.

The second mistake had been in sending "spacemen" to collect Bobby. Bobby, as it happened, didn't like science fiction. He liked cowboys and baseball, but rocket ships left him cold. Movie posters and magazine covers featuring bug-eyed monsters scared him. If the operatives who had rescued him had come galloping over the hill on horseback, and had called him Pardner instead of Earth Boy, he'd undoubtedly have been as enchanted as they meant him to be and bought into the rest of the experience with a receptive mind. As it was, by the time he was offloaded into a laboratory in a hot red rocky landscape, he was far enough out of shock to have begun to be angry, and his anger focused on the bogusness of the spacemen.

The third mistake had been in the Company's choice of a mentor for Bobby.

Because the Company hadn't been in business very long—at least, as far as its stockholders knew—a lot of important things about the education of young immortals had yet to be discovered, such as: no mortal can train an immortal. Only another immortal understands the discipline needed, the pitfalls to be avoided when getting a child accustomed to the idea of eternal life.

But when Bobby was being made immortal, there weren't any other immortals yet—not successful ones, anyway—so the Company might be excused that error, at least. And if Professor Bill Riverdale was the last person who should have been in charge of Bobby, worse errors are made all the time. Especially by persons responsible for the welfare of young children.

After all, Professor Riverdale was a good, kind man. It was true that he was romantically obsessed with the idyll of all-American freckle-faced boyhood to an unhealthy degree, but he was so far in denial about it that he would never have done anything in the least improper.

All he wanted to do, when he sat down at Bobby's bedside, was help Bobby get over the tragedy. So he started with pleasant conversation. He told Bobby all about the wonderful scientists in the far future, who had discovered the secret of time travel, and how they were now working to find a way to make people live forever.

And Bobby, lucky boy, had been selected to help them. Instead of going to an orphanage, Bobby would be transformed into, well, nearly into a superhero! It was almost as though Bobby would never have to grow up. It was every boy's dream! He'd have super-strength and super-intelligence and never have to wash behind his ears, if he didn't feel like it! And, because he'd live forever, one day he really would get to go to the planet Mars.

If the immortality experiment worked. But Professor Riverdale—or Professor Bill, as he encouraged Bobby to call him—was sure the experiment would work this time, because such a lot had been learned from the last time it had been attempted.

Professor Bill moved quickly on to speak with enthusiasm about how wonderful the future was, and how happy Bobby would be when he got there. Why, it was a wonderful place, according to what he'd heard! People lived on the moon and on Mars too, and the problems of poverty and disease and war had been licked, by gosh, and there were *no Communists!*

And boys could ride their bicycles down the treelined streets of that perfect world, and float down summer rivers on rafts, and camp out in the woods, and dream of going to the stars. . . .

Observing, however, that Bobby lay there silent and withdrawn, Professor Bill cut his rhapsody short. He concluded that Bobby needed psychiatric therapy to get over the guilt he felt at having caused the deaths of his parents and siblings.

And this was a profound mistake, because Bobby Ross—being a normal ten-year-old all-American boy—had no more conscience than Pinocchio before the Cricket showed up, and it had never occurred to him that he had been responsible for the accident. Once Professor Bill pointed it out, however, he burst into furious tears.

So poor old Professor Bill had a lot to do to help Bobby through his pain, both the grief of his loss and the physical pain of his transformation into an immortal, of which there turned out to be a lot more than anybody had thought there would be, regardless of how much had been learned from the last attempt.

He studied Bobby's case, paying particular attention to the details of his recruitment. He looked carefully at the footage taken by the operatives who had collected Bobby, and the mural on the barn caught his attention. Tears came to his eyes when he realized that the sight of the ballplayer must have been Bobby's last happy memory, the final golden moment of his innocence.

"What'd he do?" asks Clete, taking his turn at rummaging in the ice chest. "Wait, I'll bet I know. He used the image of the mural in the kid's therapy, right? Something to focus on when the pain got too bad? Pretending he was going to a happy place in his head, as an escape valve."

"Yeah. That was what he did."

"There's only root beer left. You want one?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, so why was this such a bad idea? I remember having to do mental exercises like that, myself, at the Base school. You probably did, too."

"It was a bad idea because the professor didn't know what the hell he was doing," says Porfirio. The distant barn is wavering in the heat, but he never takes his eyes off it.

Bobby's other doctors didn't know what the hell they were doing either. They'd figured out how to augment Bobby's intelligence pretty well, and they already knew how to give him unbreakable bones. They did a great job of convincing his body it would never die, and taught it how to ward off viruses and bacteria.

But they didn't know yet that even a healthy ten-year-old's DNA has already begun to deteriorate, that it's already too subject to replication errors for the immortality process to be successful. And Bobby Ross, being an all-American kid, had got all those freckles from playing unshielded in ultraviolet light. He'd gulped down soda pop full of chemicals and inhaled smoke from his dad's Lucky Strikes and hunted for tadpoles in the creek that flowed past the paper mill.

And then the doctors introduced millions of nanobots into Bobby's system, and the nanobots' job was to keep him perfect. But the doctors didn't know yet that the nanobots had to be programmed with an example to copy. So the nanobots latched onto the first DNA helix they encountered, and made it their pattern for everything Bobby ought to be. Unfortunately, it was a damaged DNA helix, but the nanobots didn't know that.

Bobby Ross grew up at the secret laboratory, and as he grew it became painfully obvious that there were still a few bugs to be worked out of the immortality process. There were lumps, there were bumps, there were skin cancers and deformities. His production of pineal tribrantine three was sporadic. Sometimes, after months of misery, his body's chemistry would right itself. The joint pain would ease, the glands would work properly again.

Or not.

Professor Bill was so, so sorry, because he adored Bobby. He'd sit with Bobby when the pain was bad, and talk soothingly to send Bobby back to that dear good year, 1951—and what a golden age 1951 seemed by this time, because it was now 1964, and Bobby had become Robert, and the world seemed to be lurching into madness. Professor Bill himself wished he could escape back into 1951. But he sent Robert there often, into that beautiful summer afternoon when Hank Bauer had leaped so high from the green diamond—and the ball had *smacked* into his leather glove—and the crowds went wild!

Though only in Robert's head, of course, because all this was being done with hypnosis.

Nobody ever formally announced that Robert Ross had failed the immortality process, because it was by no means certain he wasn't immortal. But it had become plain he would never be the flawless super-agent the Company had been hoping for, so less and less of the laboratory budget was allotted to Robert's upkeep:

What did the Company do with unsuccessful experiments? Who knows what might have happened to Robert, if Professor Bill hadn't taken the lad under his wing?

He brought Robert to live with him in his own quarters on the Base, and continued his education himself. This proved that Professor Bill really was a good man and had no ulterior interest in Robert whatsoever; for Bobby, the slender kid with skin like a sun-speckled apricot, was long gone. Robert by this time was a wizened, stooping, scarred thing with hair in unlikely places.

Professor Bill tried to make it up to Robert by giving him a rich interior life. He went rafting with Robert on the great river of numbers, under the cold and sparkling stars of theory. He tossed him physics problems compact and weighty as a baseball, and beamed with pride when Robert smacked them out of the park of human understanding. It made him feel young again, himself.

He taught the boy all he knew, and when he found that Robert shone at Temporal Physics with unsuspected brilliance, he told his superiors. This pleased the Company managers. It meant that Robert could be made to earn back the money he had cost the Company, after all. So he became an

employee, and was even paid a modest stipend to exercise his genius by fiddling around with temporal equations on the Company's behalf.

"And the only problem was, he was a psycho?" guesses Clete. "He went berserk, blew away poor old Professor Riverdale and ran off into the sunset?"

"He was emotionally unstable," Porfirio admits. "Nobody was surprised by that, after what he'd been through. But he didn't kill Professor Riverdale. He did run away, though. Walked, actually. He walked through a solid wall, in front of the professor and about fifteen other people in the audience. He'd been giving them a lecture in advanced temporal paradox theory. Just smiled at them suddenly, put down his chalk, and stepped right through the blackboard. He wasn't on the other side, when they ran into the next room to see."

"Damn," says Clete, impressed. "We can't do that."

"We sure can't," says Porfirio. He stiffens, suddenly, seeing something move on the wall of the barn. It's only the shadow of the circling hawk, though, and he relaxes.

Clete's eyes have widened, and he looks worried.

"You just threw me a grenade," he says. *Catching a grenade* is security slang for being made privy to secrets so classified one's own safety is compromised.

"You needed to know," says Porfirio.

The search for Robert Ross had gone on for years, in the laborious switchback system of time within which the Company operated. The mortals running the 1964 operation had hunted him with predictable lack of success. After the ripples from that particular causal wave had subsided, the mortal masters up in the twenty-fourth century set their immortal agents on the problem.

The ones who were security technicals, that is. The rank-and-file preservers and facilitators weren't supposed to know that there had ever been mistakes like Robert Ross. This made searching for him that much harder, but secrecy has its price.

It was assumed that Robert, being a genius in Temporal Physics, had somehow managed to escape into Time. Limitless as Time was, Robert might still be found within it. The operatives in charge of the case reasoned that a needle dropped into a haystack must gravitate toward any magnets concealed in the straw. Were there any magnets that might attract Robert Ross?

"Baseball!" croaked Professor Riverdale, when Security Executive Tvashtar had gone to the nursing home to interview him. "Bobby just loved baseball. You mark my words, he'll be at some baseball game somewhere. If he's in remission, he'll even be on some little town team."

With trembling hands he drew a baseball from the pocket of his dressing gown and held it up, cupping it in both hands as though he presented Tvashtar with a crystal wherein the future was revealed.

"He and I used to play catch with this. You might say it's the egg out of which all our hopes and dreams hatch. Peanuts and Crackerjack! The

crack of the bat! The boys of summer. Bobby was the boy of summer. Sweet Bobby . . . he'd have given anything to have played the game. . . . It's a symbol, young man, of everything that's fine and good and American."

Tvashtar nodded courteously, wondering why mortals in this era assumed the Company was run by Americans, and why they took it for granted that a stick-and-ball game had deep mystical significance. But he thanked Professor Riverdale, and left the 1970s gratefully. Then he organized a sweep through Time, centering on baseball.

"And it didn't pan out," says Clete. "Obviously."

"It didn't pan out," Porfirio agrees. "The biggest search operation the Company ever staged, up to that point. You know how much work was involved?"

It had been a lot of work. The operatives had to check out every obscure minor-league player who ever lived, to say nothing of investigating every batboy and ballpark janitor and even bums who slept under the bleachers, from 1845 to 1965. Nor was it safe to assume Robert might not be lurking beyond the fruited plains and amber waves of grain; there were Mexican, Cuban, and Japanese leagues to be investigated. Porfirio, based at that time in California, had spent the Great Depression sweeping up peanut shells from Stockton to San Diego, but neither he nor anyone else ever caught a glimpse of Robert Ross.

It was reluctantly concluded that Professor Riverdale hadn't had a clue about what was going on in Robert's head. But, since Robert had never shown up again anywhere, the investigation was quietly dropped.

Robert Ross might never have existed, or indeed died with his mortal family. The only traces left of him were in the refinements made to the immortality process after his disappearance, and in the new rules made concerning recruitment of young operatives.

The Company never acknowledged that it had made any defectives.

"Just like that, they dropped the investigation?" Clete demands. "When this guy knew how to go places without getting into a time transcendence chamber? Apparently?"

"What do you think?" says Porfirio.

Clete mutters something mildly profane and reaches down into the paper bag between his feet. He pulls out a can of potato chips and pops the lid. He eats fifteen chips in rapid succession, gulps root beer, and then says:

"Well, obviously they *didn't* drop the investigation, because here we are. Or something happened to make them open it again. They got a new lead?"

Porfirio nods.

1951. Porfirio was on standby in Los Angeles. Saturday morning in a quiet neighborhood, each little house on its square of lawn, rows of them along tree-lined streets. In most houses, kids were sprawled on the floor reading comic books or listening to Uncle Whoa-Bill on the radio, as long low morning sunlight slanted in through screen doors. In one or two

houses, though, kids sat staring at a cabinet in which was displayed a small glowing image brought by orthicon tube; for the Future, or a piece of it anyway, had arrived.

Porfirio was in the breakfast room, with a cup of coffee and the sports sections from the *Times*, the *Herald Express*, the *Examiner* and the *Citizen News*, and he was scanning for a certain profile, a certain configuration of features. He was doing this purely out of habit, because he'd been off the case for years; but, being immortal, he had a lot of time on his hands. Besides, he had all the instincts of a good cop.

But he had other instincts, too, even more deeply ingrained than hunting, and so he noticed the clamor from the living room, though it wasn't very loud. He looked up, scowling, as three-year-old Isabel rushed into the room in her nightgown.

"What is it, mi hija?"

She pointed into the living room. "Maria's bad! The scary man is on the TV," she said tearfully. He opened his arms and she ran to him.

"Maria, are you scaring your sister?" he called.

"She's just being a dope," an impatient little voice responded.

He carried Isabel into the living room, and she gave a scream and turned her face over his shoulder so she wouldn't see the television screen. Six-year-old Maria, on the other hand, stared at it as though hypnotized. Before her on the coffee table, two little bowls of Cheerios sat untasted, rapidly going soggy in their milk.

Porfirio frowned down at his great-great-great-great-(and several more greats) grand-niece. "Don't call your sister a dope. What's going on? It sounded like a rat fight in here."

"She's scared of the Amazing No Man, so she wanted me to turn him off, but he's *not* scary," said Maria. "And I want to see him."

"You were supposed to be watching Cartoon Circus," said Porfirio, glancing at the screen.

"Uh-huh, but Mr. Ringmaster has people on sometimes too," Maria replied. "See?"

Porfirio looked again. Then he sat down beside Maria on the couch and stared very hard at the screen. On his arm, Isabel kicked and made tiny complaining noises over his shoulder until he absently fished a stick of gum from his shirt pocket and offered it to her.

"Who is this guy?" he asked Maria.

"The Amazing No Man," she explained. "Isn't he *strange*?"

"Yeah," he said, watching. "Eat your cereal, honey."

And he sat there beside her as she ate, though when she dripped milk from her spoon all over her nightgown because she wasn't paying attention as she ate, he didn't notice, because he wasn't paying attention either. It was hard to look away from the TV.

A wizened little person wandered to and fro before the camera, singing nonsense in an eerily high-pitched voice. Every so often he would stop, as though he had just remembered something, and grope inside his baggy clothing. He would then produce something improbable from an inner pocket: a string of sausages. A bunch of bananas. A bottle of milk. An immense cello and bow. A kite, complete with string and tail.

He greeted each item with widely pantomimed surprise, and a cry of "Woowwwwwww!" He pretended he was offering the sausages to an invisible dog, and made them disappear from his hand as though it were really eating them. He played a few notes on the cello. He made the kite hover in midair beside him, and did a little soft-shoe dance, and the kite bobbed along with him as though it were alive. His wordless music never stopped, never developed into a melody; just modulated to the occasional *Wowww* as he pretended to make another discovery.

More and more stuff came out of the depths of his coat, to join a growing heap on the floor: sixteen bunches of bananas. A dressmaker's dummy. A live sheep on a leash. An old-fashioned Victrola, complete with horn. A stuffed penguin. A bouquet of flowers. A suit of armor.

At last, the pile was taller than the man himself. He turned, looked full into the camera with a weird smile, and winked.

Behind Porfirio's eyes, a red light flashed. A readout overlaid his vision momentarily, giving measurements, points of similarity and statistical percentages of matchup. Then it receded, but Porfirio had already figured out the truth.

The man proceeded to stuff each item back into his coat, one after another.

"See? Where does he make them all go?" asked Maria, in a shaky voice. "They can't all fit in there!"

"It's just stage magicians' tricks, *mi hija*," said Porfirio. He observed that her knuckles were white, her eyes wide. "I think this is maybe too scary for you. Let's turn it off, okay?"

"I'm not scared! He's just . . . funny," she said.

"Well, your little sister is scared," Porfirio told her, and rose and changed the channel, just as Hector wandered from the bedroom in his pajamas, blinking like an owl.

"Popi, Uncle Frio won't let me watch *Amazing No Man!*" Maria complained.

"What, the scary clown?" Hector rolled his eyes. "Honey, you know that guy gives you nightmares."

"I have to go out," said Porfirio, handing Isabel over to her father.

"You were living with mortals? Who were these people?" asks Clete.

"I had a brother, when I was mortal," says Porfirio. "I check up on his descendants now and then. Which has nothing to do with this case, okay? But that's where I was when I spotted Robert Ross. All the time we'd been looking for a baseball player, he'd been working as the *Amazing Gnomon*."

"And a gnomon is the piece on a sundial that throws the shadow," says Clete promptly. He grins. "Sundials. Time. Temporal physics. They just can't resist leaving clues, can they?"

Porfirio shakes his head. Clete finishes the potato chips, tilting the can to get the last bits.

"So when the guy was programmed with a Happy Place, it wasn't baseball he fixated on," he speculates. "It was 1951. 'The Golden Year.' He had a compulsion to be there in 1951, maybe?"

Porfirio says nothing.

"So, how did it go down?" says Clete, looking expectant.

It hadn't gone down, at least not then.

Porfirio had called for backup, because it would have been fatally stupid to have done otherwise, and by the time he presented his LAPD badge at the studio door, the Amazing Gnomon had long since finished his part of the broadcast and gone home.

The station manager at KTLA couldn't tell him much. The Amazing Gnomon had his checks sent to a post office box. He didn't have an agent. Nobody knew where he lived. He just showed up on time every third Saturday and hit his mark, and he worked on a closed set, but that wasn't unusual with stage magicians.

"Besides," said the mortal with a shudder, "he never launders that costume. He gets under those lights and believe me, brother, we're glad to clear the set. The cameraman has to put Vapo-rub up his nose before he can stand to be near the guy. Hell of an act, though, isn't it?"

The scent trail had been encouraging, even if it had only led to a locker in a downtown bus station. The locker, when opened, proved to contain the Amazing Gnomon's stage costume: a threadbare old overcoat, a pair of checked trousers, and clown shoes. They were painfully foul, but contained no hidden pockets or double linings where anything might be concealed, nor any clue to their owner's whereabouts.

By this time, however, the Company had marshaled all available security techs on the West Coast, so it wasn't long before they tracked down Robert Ross.

Then all they had to do was figure out what the hell to do next.

Clete's worried look has returned.

"Holy shit, I never thought about that. How do you arrest one of *us*?" he asks.

Porfirio snarls in disgust. His anger is not with Clete, but with the executive who saddled him with Clete.

"Are you ready to catch another grenade, kid?" he inquires, and without waiting for Clete's answer he extends his arm forward, stiffly, with the palm up. He has to lean back in his seat to avoid hitting the Volkswagen's windshield. He drops his hand sharply backward, like Spider-Man shooting web fluid, and Clete just glimpses the bright point of a weapon emerging from Porfirio's sleeve. Pop, like a cobra's fang, it hits the windshield and retracts again, out of sight. It leaves a bead of something pale pink on the glass.

"Too cool," says Clete, though he is uneasily aware that he has no weapon like that. He clears his throat, wondering how he can ask what the pink stuff is without sounding frightened. He has always been told operatives are immune to any poison.

"It's not poison," says Porfirio, reading his mind. "It's derived from Theobromos. If I stick you in the leg with this, you'll sleep like a baby for twelve hours. That's all."

"Oh. Okay," says Clete, and it very much isn't okay, because a part of the foundation of his world has just crumbled.

"You can put it in another operative's drink, or you can inject it with an arm-mounted rig like this one," Porfirio explains patiently. "You can't shoot it in a dart, because any one of us could grab the dart out of the air, right? You have to close with whoever it is you're supposed to take down, go hand to hand."

"But first, you have to get the other guy in a trap."

Robert Ross had been in a trap. He seemed to have chosen it.

He turned out to be living in Hollywood, in an old residency hotel below Franklin. The building was squarely massive, stone, and sat like a megalith under the hill. Robert had a basement apartment with one tiny window on street level, at the back. He might have seen daylight for an hour at high summer down in there, but he'd have to stand on a stool to do it. And wash the window first.

The sub-executive in charge of the operation had looked at the reconnaissance reports and shaken his head. If an operative wanted a safe place to hide, he'd choose a flimsy frame building, preferably surrounding himself with mortals. There were a hundred cheap boarding houses in Los Angeles that would have protected Robert Ross. The last place any sane immortal would try to conceal himself would be a basement dug into granite with exactly one door, where he might be penned in by other immortals and unable to break out through a wall.

The sub-executive decided that Robert *wanted* to be brought in.

It seemed to make a certain sense. Living in a place like that, advertising his presence on television; Robert must be secretly longing for some kindly mentor to find him and tell him it was time to come home. Alternatively, he might be daring the Company problem solvers to catch him. Either way, he wasn't playing with a full deck.

So the sub-executive made the decision to send in a psychologist. A *mortal* psychologist. Not a security tech with experience in apprehending immortal fugitives, though several ringed the building and one—Porfirio, in fact—was stationed outside the single tiny window that opened below the sidewalk on Franklin Avenue.

Porfirio had leaned against the wall, pretending to smoke and watch the traffic zooming by. He could hear Robert Ross breathing in the room below. He could hear his heartbeat. He heard the polite double knock on the door, and the slight intake of breath; he heard the gentle voice saying "Bobby, may I come in?"

"It's not locked," was the reply, and Porfirio started. The voice belonged to a ten-year-old boy.

He heard the click and creak as the door opened, and the sound of two heartbeats within the room, and the psychologist saying: "We had quite a time finding you, Bobby. May I sit down?"

"Sure," said the child's voice.

"Thank you, Bobby," said the other, and Porfirio heard the scrape of a chair. "Oh, dear, are you all right? You're bleeding through your bandage."

"I'm all right. That's just where I had the tumor removed. It grows back a lot. I go up to the twenty-first century for laser surgery. Little clinics in out-of-the-way places, you know? I go there all the time, but you never notice."

"You've been very clever at hiding from us, Bobby. We'd never have found you if you hadn't been on television. We've been searching for you for years."

"In your space ships?" said the child's voice, with adult contempt.

"In our time machines," said the psychologist. "Professor Riverdale was sure you'd run away to become a baseball player."

"I can't ever be a baseball player," replied Robert Ross coldly. "I can't run fast enough. One of my legs grew shorter than the other. Professor Bill never noticed that, though, did he?"

"I'm so sorry, Bobby."

"Good old Professor Bill, huh? I tried being a cowboy, and a soldier, and a fireman, and a bunch of other stuff. Now I'm a clown. But I can't ever be a baseball player. No home runs for Bobby."

Out of the corner of his eye, Porfirio saw someone laboring up the hill toward him from Highland Avenue. He turned his head and saw the cop.

The too-patient adult voice continued:

"Bobby, there are a lot of other things you can be in the Future."

"I hate the Future."

Porfirio watched the cop's progress as the psychologist hesitated, then pushed on:

"Do you like being a clown, Bobby?"

"I guess so," said Robert. "At least people *see* me when they look at me now. The man outside the window saw me, too."

There was a pause. The cop was red-faced from the heat and his climb, but he was grinning at Porfirio.

"Well, Bobby, that's one of our security men, out there to keep you safe."

"I know perfectly well why he's there," Robert said. "He doesn't scare me. I want him to hear what I have to say, so he can tell Professor Bill and the rest of them."

"What do you want to tell us, Bobby?" said the psychologist, a little shakily.

There was a creak, as though someone had leaned forward in a chair.

"You know why you haven't caught me? Because I figured out how to go to 1951 all by myself. And I've been living in it, over and over and over. The Company doesn't think that's possible, because of the variable permeability of temporal fabric, but it is. The trick is to go to a different *place* every *time*. There's just one catch."

The cop paused to wipe sweat off his brow, but he kept his eyes on Porfirio.

"What's the catch, Bobby?"

"Do you know what happens when you send something back to the same year often enough?" Robert sounded amused. "Like, about a hundred million times?"

"No, Bobby, I don't know."

"I know. I experimented. I tried it the first time with a wheel off a toy car. I sent it to 1912, over and over, until—do you know where Tunguska is?"

"What are you trying to tell me, Bobby?" The psychologist was losing his professional voice.

"Then," said Robert, "I increased the mass of the object. I sent a baseball back. Way back. Do you know what really killed off the dinosaurs?"

"Hey there, zoot suit," said the cop, when he was close enough. "You wouldn't be loitering, would you?"

". . . You can wear a hole in the fabric of space and time," Robert was saying. "And it just might destroy everything in the whole world. You included. And if you were pretty sick of being alive, but you couldn't die, that might seem like a great idea. Don't you think?"

There was the sound of a chair being pushed back.

Porfirio grimaced and reached into his jacket for his badge, but the cop pinned Porfirio's hand to his chest with the tip of his nightstick.

"Bobby, we can help you!" cried the psychologist.

"I'm not little Bobby anymore, you asshole," said the child's voice, rising. "I'm a million, million years old."

Porfirio looked the cop in the eye.

"Vice squad," he said. The cop sagged. Porfirio produced his badge.

"But I got a tip from one of the residents here—" said the cop.

"Woowwwwww," said the weird little singsong voice, and there was a brief scream.

"What happened?" demands Clete. He has gone very pale.

"We never found out," says Porfirio. "By the time I got the patrolman to leave and ran around to the front of the building, the other techs had already gone in and secured the room. The only problem was, there was nothing to secure. The room was empty. No sign of Ross, or the mortal either. No furniture, even, except a couple of wooden chairs. He hadn't been living there. He'd just used the place to lure us in."

"Did anybody ever find the mortal?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact," Porfirio replies. "Fifty years later. In London."

"He'd gone forward in time?" Clete exclaims. "But that's supposed to be impossible. Isn't it?"

Porfirio sighs.

"So they say, kid. Anyway, he hadn't gone forward in time. Remember, about ten years ago, when archaeologists were excavating that medieval hospital over there? They found hundreds of skeletons in its cemetery. Layers and layers of the dead. And—though this didn't make it into the news, not even into the *Fortean Times*—one of the skeletons was wearing a Timex."

Clete giggles shrilly.

"Was it still ticking?" he asks. "What the hell are you telling me? There's this crazy immortal guy on the loose, and he's able to time-travel just using his brain, and he wants to destroy the whole world and he's figured out how, and we're just sitting here?"

"You have a better idea?" says Porfirio. "Please tell me if you do, okay?"

Clete controls himself with effort.

"All right, what did the Company do?" he asks. "There's a plan, isn't there, for taking him out? There must be, or we wouldn't be here now."

Porfirio nods.

"But what are we doing here *now*?" says Clete. "Shouldn't we be in 1951, where he's hiding? Wait, no, we probably shouldn't, because that'd place even more strain on the fabric of time and space. Or whatever."

"It would," Porfirio agrees.

"So . . . here we are at the place where Bobby Ross was recruited. The Company must expect he's going to come back here. Because this is where he caused the accident. Because the criminal always returns to the scene of the crime, right?" Clete babbles.

"Maybe," says Porfirio. "The Company already knows he leaves 1951 sometimes, for medical treatment."

"And sooner or later he'll be driven to come *here*," says Clete, and now he too is staring fixedly at the barn. "And—and today is June 30, 2008. The car crash happened fifty years ago today. That's why we're here."

"He might come," says Porfirio. "So we just wait—" He stiffens, stares hard, and Clete stares hard too and sees the little limping figure walking up the old road, just visible through the high weeds.

"Goddamn," says Clete, and is out of the car in a blur, ejecting candy bar wrappers and potato chip cans as he goes, and Porfirio curses and tells him to wait, but it's too late; Clete has crossed the highway in a bound and is running across the valley, as fast as only an immortal can go. Porfirio races after him, up that bare yellow hill with its red rocks that still bear faint carbon traces of horror, and he clears the edge of the road in time to hear Clete bellow:

"Security! Freeze!"

"Don't—" says Porfirio, just as Clete launches himself forward to tackle Robert Ross.

Robert is smiling, lifting his arms as though in a gesture of surrender. Despite the heat, he is wearing a long overcoat. Its lining is torn, just under his arm, and where the sweat-stained rayon satin hangs down Porfirio glimpses fathomless black night, white stars.

"*Lalala la la. Woooowww*," says Robert Ross, just as Clete hits him. Clete shrieks and then is gone, sucked into the void of stars.

Porfirio stands very still. Robert winks at him.

"What a catch!" he says, in ten-year-old Bobby's voice.

It's hot up there, on the old white road, under the blue summer sky. Porfirio feels sweat prickling between his shoulderblades.

"Hey, Mr. Policeman," says Robert, "I remember you. Did you tell the Company what you heard? Have they been thinking about what I'm going to do? Have they been scared, all these years?"

"Sure they have, Mr. Ross," says Porfirio, flexing his hands.

Robert frowns. "Come on, *Mr. Ross* was my father. I'm Bobby."

"Oh, I get it. That would be the Mr. Ross who died right down there?" Porfirio points. "In the crash? Because his kid was so stupid he didn't know better than to lean out the window of a moving car?"

An expression of amazement crosses the wrinkled, dirty little face, to be replaced with white-hot rage.

"Faggot! Don't you call me stupid!" screams Robert. "I'm brilliant! I can make the whole world come to an end if I want to!"

"You made it come to an end for your family, anyway," says Porfirio.

"No, I didn't," says Robert, clenching his fists. "Professor Bill explained about that. It just happened. Accidents happen all the time. I was innocent."

"Yeah, but Professor Bill lied to you, didn't he?" says Porfirio. "Like, about how wonderful it would be to live forever?"

His voice is calm, almost bored. Robert says nothing. He looks at Porfirio with tears in his eyes, but there is hate there too.

"Hey, Bobby," says Porfirio, moving a step closer. "Did it ever once occur to you to come back here and prevent the accident? I mean, it's impossible, sure, but didn't you even think of giving it a try? Messing with causality? It might have been easy, for a super-powered genius kid like you. But you didn't, did you? I can see it in your eyes."

Robert glances uncertainly down the hill, where in some dimension a 1946 Plymouth is still blackening, windows shattering, popping, and the dry summer grass is vanishing around it as the fire spreads outward like a black pool.

"What do you think, Bobby? Maybe pushed the grandfather paradox, huh? Gone back to see if you couldn't bend the rules, burn down this barn before the mural was painted? Or even broken Hank Bauer's arm, so the Yankees didn't win the World Series in 1951? I can think of a couple of dozen different things I'd have tried, Bobby, if I'd had superpowers like you.

"But you never even tried. Why was that, Bobby?"

"*La la la*," murmurs Robert, opening his arms again and stepping toward Porfirio. Porfirio doesn't move. He looks Robert in the face and says: "You're stupid. Unfinished. You never grew up, Bobby."

"Professor Bill said never growing up was a good thing," says Robert.

"Professor Bill said that because he never grew up either," says Porfirio. "You weren't real to him, Bobby. He never saw *you* when he looked at you."

"No, he never did," says Robert, in a thick voice because he is crying. "He just saw what he wanted me to be. Freckle-faced kid!" He points bitterly at the brown discoloration that covers half his cheek. "Look at me now!"

"Yeah, and you'll never be a baseball player. And you're still so mad about that, all you can think of to do is to pay the Company back," says Porfirio, taking another step toward him.

"That's right!" sobs Robert.

"With the whole eternal world to explore, and a million other ways to be happy—still, all you want is to pay them back," says Porfirio, watching him carefully.

"Yeah!" cries Robert, panting. He wipes his nose on his dirty sleeve. He looks up again, sharply. "I mean—I mean—"

"See? Stupid. And you're not a good boy, Bobby," says Porfirio gently. "You're a goddamn monster. You're trying to blow up a whole world full of innocent people. You know what should happen, now? Your dad ought to come walking up that hill, madder than hell, and punish you."

Robert looks down the hillside.

"But he can't, ever again," he says. He sounds tired.

Porfirio has already moved, and before the last weary syllable is out of his mouth Robert feels the scorpion-sting in his arm.

He whirls around, but Porfirio has already retreated, withdrawn up the hillside. He stands before the mural, and the painted outfielder smiles over his shoulder. Robert clutches his arm, beginning to cry afresh.

"No fair," he protests. But he knows it's more than fair. It is even a relief.

He falls to his knees, whimpering at the heat of the old road's surface. He crawls to the side and collapses, in the yellow summer grass.

"Will I have to go to the Future now?" Robert asks piteously.

"No, son. No Future," Porfirio replies.

Robert nods and closes his eyes. He could sink through the rotating earth if he tried, escape once again into 1951; instead he floats away from time itself, into the back of his father's hand.

Porfirio walks down the hill toward him. As he does so, an all-terrain vehicle comes barreling up the old road, mowing down thistles in its path.

It shudders to a halt and Clete leaps out, leaving the door open in his headlong rush up the hill. He is not wearing the same suit he wore when last seen by Porfirio.

"You stinking son of a bitch *defective*," he roars, and aims a kick at Robert's head. Porfirio grabs his arm.

"Take it easy," he says.

"He sent me back six hundred thousand years! Do you know how long I had to wait before the Company even opened a damn transport depot?" says Clete, and looking at his smooth ageless face Porfirio can see that ages have passed over it. Clete now has permanently furious eyes. Their glare bores into Porfirio like acid. *No convenience stores in 598,000 BC, huh?* Porfirio thinks to himself.

"You knew he was going to do this to me, didn't you?" demands Clete.

"No," says Porfirio. "All I was told was, there'd be complications to the arrest. And you should have known better than to rush the guy."

"You got that right," says Clete, shrugging off his hand. "So why don't you do the honors?"

He goes stalking back to his transport, and hauls a body bag from the back seat. Porfirio sighs. He reaches into his coat and withdraws what looks like a screwdriver handle. When he thumbs a button on its side, however, a half-circle of blue light forms at one end. He tests it with a random slice through a thistle, which falls over at once. He leans down and scans Robert Ross carefully, because he wants to be certain he is unconscious.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs.

Working with the swiftness of long practice, he does his job. Clete returns, body bag under his arm, watching with grim satisfaction. Hank Bauer is still smiling down from the mural.

When the disassembly is finished, Porfirio loads the body bag into the car and climbs in beside it. Clete gets behind the wheel and backs carefully down the road. Bobby Ross may not be able to die, but he is finally on his way to eternal rest.

The Volkswagen sits there rusting for a month before it is stolen.

The blood remains on the old road for four months, before autumn rains wash it away, but they do wash it away. By the next summer the yellow grass is high, and the road as white as innocence once more. ○

ETIQUETTE WITH YOUR ROBOT HUSBAND

Tell him the new solar collector panel on his head is sexy.

Change the channel for him,
even though he is his own remote.

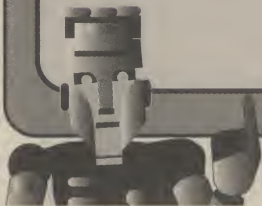
Agree when he says that extra weight is "upgrades."

Accept that even with a 250 terabyte memory,
he will forget your anniversary.

Never call the computer "the other woman."

Don't worry when the hard drive goes floppy—
it happens to the best of them.

—Karina and Robert Fabian



SCATTER

Jack Skillingstead

The author tells us, "I've always loved private eye stories and even wrote a novel in the genre. 'Scatter' occurred to me when I saw Humphrey Bogart hawking somebody or other's product on a TV commercial, which led to speculations in general about the use of digitally manipulated images of classic movie stars. Then, in classic SF tradition, I asked myself, What If?"

I was enjoying the memory of a single malt scotch I had once drunk in a Las Vegas casino back around ought '49, when I sensed someone enter my office. I let the scotch go (Glenfiddich, twenty-two dollars a shot) and came forward.

She stood clutching her handbag in front of her. She was wearing a green skirt in an iridescent fish scale design with a matching jacket. The skirt clung to her hips like a second skin. Holy mackerel! And she wore one of those hats that look like neuro-netting with feathers.

"Please take a seat," I said.

The only seat in the office placed her in front of a retinal scanner. Before she had her pack of smokeless c's out of her handbag, I knew everything about her, from her name (Kari Tolerico), to the brand of coffee she preferred, and her multiple online id's, not to mention that unfortunate polyp she'd had lasered out of her most intimate recesses.

She lit up, crossed her legs, and waited. Fairly impressive. Most of my prospective clients, when confronted with an empty office and a disembodied voice, tended to fidget. Kari Tolerico was not the fidgeting type.

I chose to appear behind my desk as Robert Mitchum, circa 1947, the *Out of the Past* era. Fully colorized for contemporary sensibilities, of course.

"How can I help you, Ms. Tolerico?"

"There's going to be a murder."

"Is there?"

"It's a plot to kill my lover's husband."

"What makes you think such a thing?"

She shrugged, her jacket gleaming like an oil slick.

"Intuition," she said.

"And—?"

"Poison."

"Intuition and poison. It sounds like somebody or other's autobiography."

"Does it? I'm not a reader."

"You're not missing much," I said. "Just the distilled and refined thoughts, art, philosophy, and history of the human race."

"I see."

"Seeing's good, too," I said.

"Are you a reader then, Mr. Frye?"

"I was before circumstances forced me to surrender corporeal existence. Now I can only read books that I've already read, that are in my memory vault. Anything new is scanned, and I can access the text, but it's not like holding a book in my hands and turning the pages."

"What a romantic you are."

"Yeah, I'm Byronesque. Let's get back to the poison, Ms. Tolerico."

"Actually it's more of a viral infection."

"Huh?"

Suddenly the taste of Glenfidditch came forward, burning at the back of the throat I didn't have. With an effort of concentration, I managed to quell the sensation. But another immediately took its place. The sensation of urine-wet sheets gone cold on my little-boy body.

"You don't look well, Mr. Frye."

"You don't think so?"

"Not at all. That hound-dog face you're wearing is getting all grainy and flickery, too."

Damn it. I shuffled her data, hunting for the clue I must have missed, the thread, the inconsistency. My Mitchum biolo stood, leaned over the desk, and stretched out his arm to point at the woman's betraying eye. Any reasonable person would have flinched. Ms. Tolerico merely grinned and batted her pretty lashes.

"What did you *do*?" I said.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Mr. Frye."

"I'm sure you do!"

The wet sheets went away, and I found myself experiencing a memorable orgasm. This orgasm had occurred on the same day that I'd enjoyed my twenty-two dollar Glenfidditch. That had been a hell of a lucky day. Accompanying the orgasm was the scent/taste of the woman's perfume. *La Bonne Nuit* was the name of the perfume. Molly was the name of the woman. Later, she became my wife, and, later still, she shoved me off a five-story balcony—more or less accidentally—and I suddenly found myself on a new career path.

I cried out, shook the orgasm off, but by then, my office was empty.

I accessed the broadcaster on 2nd and Vine, planted myself as Richard Widmark, *Kiss of Death* period, in the middle of the sidewalk in front of my building. Some people walked though me, momentarily scattering the microscopic swarm that allowed me to flirt with physical existence. A few who weren't paying attention sidestepped at the last moment, and I endured the usual taunts from the anti-biolo contingent. I could sympathize. Before I went incorporeal, all the glinty crap on practically every sidewalk used to irritate me, too. And I wasn't sad to see the city ban bios from public restaurants, either. But it's amazing how a five-story plunge followed by a sudden stop can change your perspective on things.

A kid with a fashionably flayed earlobe passed by on his wheel and waggled his hand around in my head. It was several seconds before the nano flakes could gather light in an orderly fashion and transmit it back to my "eyes." I waited, all the while fending off a chaotic assault of memory sensation.

Just as I regained my vision, Kari Tolerico emerged from the building. I stepped in front of her. She walked through me without a word. I scattered, reconstituted, and turned to follow. I felt like tying her to a chair and hurling her down a staircase.

"Hold on!" I said.

She ignored me, and, for a moment, I thought that she might be one of the estimated 12 percent of the population who had declined an Aural Wave implant. I had the figures down cold, because my Redmond-based company had coordinated the local advertising blitz. *Catch The Wave!* was our brilliant hook.

"Ms.—"

"Stop bothering me."

"Lady, I haven't *started* bothering you."

"Then don't."

"Who are you?"

"Jesus, you *scanned* me."

"Okay. *Why* are you? As in: *Why* are you fucking with my upload? And how did you do it?"

She ignored me again. And we were approaching the outside range of the broadcaster. There were plenty of others, and I knew the location of every one in the city, but I was rapidly becoming incapable of holding a coherent thought. I stopped at the flickering limit of the broadcaster, and she walked on.

"Why!" I shouted.

The sensation of numbingly cold surf foamed around my ankles, undermining the sand beneath my feet.

Kari Tolerico threw me a saucy look over her shoulder and said:

"Favor for a friend."

Then I let go.

It smothered me, a blizzard of sensation and memory, facts and fancies, a short-circuited synopsisopic not-so-merry-go-round.

I fled to a strong memory of sanctuary: the bedroom in my childhood house. Slamming the door, I simultaneously constructed barricades fashioned from the steady sensation of security and acceptance that had prevailed during the period of childhood that I originally occupied this room. The chaos yammered outside the door. It made scratchy rat-sounds in the walls, battered softly and insistently at the window.

But it couldn't get in.

Which was great, except that neither could I get *out*. It beat going insane, though. I paced around my little room. The bed was made up with a baseball-themed spread and pillow case. My bookshelf was well-stocked with prepubescent adventures. (I was still a couple of years early for the pubescent adventures that I would later download and hide under the mattress.)

Downloading porno. That gave me an idea.

I fired up the terminal on my school desk and punched in the access code for my agency files. Fortunately, dream logic prevailed, and the data began to flow; I had a narrow conduit to the real world. The world outside my scrambled engrams.

I scrolled the Kari Tolerico file. It was slow work. Beyond the barricaded walls of my child's bedroom, I could have immersed my being in the file, let it soak through, a filter catching potential clues.

But here, it took hours (relative time) to hunt through Tolerico's info, even after dismissing the dross of her grocery bills, library, and digital rental, etc. Her insurance and medical records yielded routine mosaics.

Something heavy thumped against the window.

Giving my better judgment a pass, I got up and tilted the blinds open. Fishsticks, my ex-wife's ex-border collie, was mooshed against the glass, blood gouting from his mouth, his body heaving. Just the way he looked that day the van hit him in the parking lot of the Seabreeze. Molly had screamed when she saw him. Some start to a vacation. She'd blamed me, of course. Well, I'd let him off the leash. We had gone to our Seaside condo to try to fix things, and instead wound up with a dead pet and a fresh load of recriminations. And later on, we wound up with an almost-dead me. I'm the first to admit that one weekend at the seashore is unlikely to retrieve a romance buried under eleven years of estrangement. Standing out in the salty breeze on the balcony, trying to put my arms around Molly, who was having none of it, I'd said something stupid like, "You'd rather be up here with Fishsticks." We were both drunk. She shoved me hard, and I tipped over the rail. I guess she loved that damn dog.

I closed the blinds.

Good old Fishsticks. Molly liked goofy names. With that thought, something clicked. I addressed the terminal again, hunted down Ms. Tolerico's net monikers. I *thought* one of them had a familiar ring. *Surga_can*. A term of endearment, back when Molly and I had shared such things.

I composed a brief message and routed it to every one of Kari Tolerico's mail accounts, work and private. When she opened her primary account from her cell, I nailed her location. Hours, if not days, may have passed in my bedroom, but out in the real world, only minutes had elapsed since I evaporated on 2nd Avenue.

She didn't reply to my message.

If I wanted answers, I'd have to brave the storm—only bravery didn't have much to do with it. All things being equal, it was more a matter of abject surrender to a suicidally stupid impulse. But it was either that or spend the rest of eternity in my nine-year-old self's bedroom.

I opened the door—

—and came forward.

Hell's own sensorium awaited me. I slogged through kisses and constipation, the one swat on the ass my father ever gave me—and a few erotically intended ones from a certain female companion in later years as well. The taste of heavily salted yams. Farts and the smell of pickle juice. Headaches, drunken euphoria, sushi, vomit erupting up my throat, tears,

falling from the Seabreeze balcony, turning over in midair, drunk, leaving my stomach on the fifth floor.

Before I struck with a paralyzing, tissue-tearing, bone-breaking smack, I side-slipped into a projector two blocks north of the last one I'd used, and, as Kirk Douglas (*The Bad and the Beautiful*, 1952), I fell into stride with the Tolerico woman. Most of the old-time tough guys were out of copyright, fortunately.

"Guess who?" I said.

"For Christ's sake!"

"Now don't be that way. Surga_can."

She stopped walking. So did I. A fat woman on a wheel glided through me. I scattered and reconstituted. Ms. Tolerico and I faced each other across from a micropark. A squirrel, representing the park's contingent of fauna, twitched halfway up a spindly birch and watched us.

"Tell me," I said. "What I already know."

She took a moment to light a smokeless c, while I grimaced under the continuous assault of chaos. I couldn't take much more. If I didn't flee back to my safe room, my core personality would shred and join the Mad-hatter's fucking tea party.

"She wants you dead," Ms. Tolerico said.

"I am dead."

"Then she wants you *gone*. She can't stand it, you haunting around like a ghost or something. It drives her crazy."

"Molly."

"You want my advice?"

"Not especially."

"Let it go. Don't fight. Then it'll be over. Rest in peace. Get it?"

"What did you use?"

"Let it all go, Frye. Be happy."

She snapped her C at the squirrel and walked away.

I almost didn't make it back to my room.

Hunkered over my little kid's terminal, I pecked out a message to my ex-wife. In some ways, I had kept in better touch with her since my death. But this particular message was tough. For a long time, I got no further than: *Dear Molly*. Well, there were distractions aplenty. It sounded like a Lovecraftian army of rats in the walls. I got up and pressed my ear to the wall for a few moments. Not rats; voices. Squealy little voices that scrabbled frantically for a way in.

Dear Molly: You pushed me off the balcony and all, but isn't this a bit much? It won't obliterate me, you know. I'll persist and it'll be hell. Worse than Hell. Please help. Call Surga_can off.

I sent it and started waiting. Reduced to a nine-by-ten foot room, the texture and content of my memory vault was still impressive, if limited. I flipped through a couple of the flashprint books, boy's adventure stuff. And I was like one of those pictures of the guy looking at a picture of a guy looking at a picture, looking . . . except I was *myself* a memory, looking at a memory, that was full of memories, etc.

I put the book away.

On my knees, I found my baseball glove and ball under the bed. Cool! I threw the ball into the glove a few times. I guess it would have been cooler if I'd had my nine-year-old self's sensibilities.

I checked the flatscreen. No message.

I risked another look out the window. It was kind of like looking out the window of Dorothy's house while it careened around that tornado. *Things* drifted across my vision. School buses, hedges, tennis shoes, toys, faces (Auntie Em!), and on and on. If I got closer to the glass, I picked up smells; closer still, and it was flavor ghosts; closer yet, and a vibrating stew of emotion made me draw back abruptly.

I turned away, breathing funny. The image of an envelope was tumbling around the flatscreen. I had mail.

Sitting on the kid's chair, my knees halfway to my armpits, I opened the letter. It was succinct:

Huh?—Molly.

Damn it.

In corporeal life, I'd been slightly rich and more than slightly bored. The rich part had allowed me to have an incorporeal existence after the plunge. But one thing I wasn't going to do with Daniel Frye's life, Part Deux, was run a business. At least, not a large business with managers and scores of employees and headaches and all that. Almost immediately after my death, I cashed out, disbursed a healthy mini-fortune Molly's way, then built me a detective agency with one employee: Myself. And I was *good* at it.

So I tried to be good at it now.

I opened the Tolerico file and began rearranging clunky blocks of raw data. I lingered over her retinal scan, over the image of it. After a while, I noticed two anomalies. The first was a tiny scar just above the iris, and I had no doubt that it had been surgically created. Because the second anomaly was something like a pinhead glint of metal or some highly reflective grain floating *inside* the retina. If I'd had any skin, it would have been crawling.

Speaking of skin. . .

I felt a hot breath on the back of my neck. I jerked around, but the room was empty. Somebody, at some time or other, had breathed like that on the back of my neck, and the memory impression had just come up. Which was a bad sign, because it meant that the barricades had been breached.

"Shit."

I looked around the room, a little frantically. First, there was nothing. Then Fishsticks was there, sprawled and heaving and vomiting blood.

I looked away, and had an orgasm, immediately followed by a flutter of stomach flu. My hands dotted up with measles, but only for a few seconds.

I concentrated on my barricades and stared into the flatscreen. The room grew crowded. I didn't look up. Indistinct reflections moved on the flatscreen glass. Visiting memory ghosts, crowding behind me. The air changed to the recycled hiss of a sub-orbital, familiar from scores of

flights. I tried to isolate the reflective grain in Ms. Tolerico's eye. A hot shower's needle spray soaked me. My hair (I had hair!) dripped on the touchpad while my fingers worked. It was tough, because my fingers kept changing size now. At one point, a baby's chubby starfish digits slapped at the pad, and the data load dumped out, and I bawled.

Suddenly, my bedroom fractured, and I was everywhere, tumbling in a confetti of memory impressions. I struggled to protect my core being, clinging to a fragment of stable sanity.

Something bright and implacable twisted through it all, like a parasitic spaghetti-string worm, and I knew that was the source, the virus or whatever it was the woman had set loose in my upload.

It pulsed silver then red, redder, reddest. Then . . . was gone.

I sensed an eye withdrawing from the retinal scanner in my office, but all I could do was luxuriate in the sudden quiet and peaceful drift. The door opened. I stirred myself, came forward, saw Kari Tolerico pulling my office door shut.

Bogart. *Casablanca* / *To Have and Have Not* era, screw the color saturation.

"Thanks for figuring out my message," I said. "Eventually."

Molly wiped her eyes, which had changed from brown to tentative blue with her tears. I hated that phony Mood Wash crap, but didn't say anything.

"Do you have to be like that?" she said.

Passersby gave us looks. Gave *me* looks. Hardly anybody went B/W nowadays. We were sitting on a bench in Myrtle Edwards park, facing Elliot Bay.

"Who do you prefer?" I asked.

"Just be yourself."

"I could saturate Bogie."

"Please, Daniel."

I went away, then came forward as Daniel Frye. I guess it was the wrong one, though, because she frowned and looked away.

"What's the matter now?"

"You never looked like that," she said, watching a white gull ride over the breakwater.

"Yes, I did. You just don't remember. I looked like this when we first met. Come on."

"Daniel."

"Okay, okay."

I dissolved into fairy dust once more. When I came forward again, the bench next to Molly glittered in the noon sun like mica.

"Satisfied?" I said.

She smiled sadly. "I'm trying to be."

"Do I detect a subtext?"

I stood before her, the version of Daniel Frye she had last known, an exemplar of male-pattern baldness and the moderately inflated spare tire. The faintly ridiculous man she had shoved in drunken anger one night—then she'd screamed and screamed as I fell from her forever and she tried

to draw me back. Slipping away with the dread acceleration of gravity, I'd seen her pale arms thrust out after me.

"Daniel, this is the last time for us. This is goodbye for good. It has to be."

"Why? Because your damn girlfriend says so?"

"No. Because *I* say so. Jesus, Daniel, when you were *around*, you were never around. Now, when you're not real, you're always popping up in my ear, or on my computer, or as one of these creepy projections."

"I'm real," I said.

A thirty-foot yacht motored into the chop beyond the breakwater. A man and a woman in bulky white sweaters stood in the open cockpit, arms around each other's backs, the man steering one-handed. Dashing.

I turned to Molly.

"You really said that stuff to her, didn't you. About how you couldn't stand me haunting around your life."

She stared at me, her eyes going deep blue at last.

"Quit that," I said.

"I'm sorry, Daniel. Kari took it to heart. I was upset and vulnerable."

"But you meant it."

"I should have told you and gotten it over with. But I couldn't hurt you again. Kari is protective of me. We're intimate—a concept you never understood."

"I guess I don't have to hear the gory details."

"I'm sorry."

"All right, all right."

"I have to go now," Molly said.

"You don't *have* to."

"Yes. I do."

It was a deep-blue goodbye, and I watched her walk across the park. Kari Tolerico was waiting for her in the parking lot. They got into a solar pod and rolled off. A jogger ran through me. I scattered, and stayed that way. ○



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A CHANGE OF MIND

Robert Reed

Robert Reed's sequel to *Marrow* has been retitled and rescheduled. It's now called *The Well of Stars*, and it will emerge from Tor Books early in 2005. Mr. Reed's novelette, "Hexagons" (*Asimov's*, July 2003), is currently on the Hugo ballot.

They remembered him as a quiet man, a standoffish man, but essentially friendly—a good neighbor with an easy smile and enough generosity to order cookies from six of the local Girl Scouts. Except, of course, that he moved away before the cookies arrived, leaving the bill unpaid. Yet nobody acted upset. It had been a nice gesture on his part, and the residents seemed to genuinely miss their one-time neighbor. "When did he move away?" Morgan would ask. To a person, they said it had been a year or maybe thirteen months. Or he left in February, which was almost fifteen months ago. Local memories were conspicuously aligned, always vague but forthright about their limitations. Nobody could remember seeing him move out, so they assumed he had left in the middle of the night. He must have taken his long van, since it too had vanished, and with it his essential possessions, including his hobby equipment. "What kind of equipment?" The shiny stuff, people reported. The fancy stuff. The machinery that glowed in the night, making his windows bleed a purple light. "A deep pure purple light," they described, with exactly the same words and the same intonations.

The man's house had been built at the turn of the century. A drab little split-level made from sloppy lumber and sheetrock, it sat on a side street in what was a tiny, practically anonymous town near the Canadian border. A vigorous old woman in her nineties, named Sandra, lived next door. Her entire life had been spent in the same residence, and with the clarity of mind that comes to people who had done little and gone nowhere, the woman could name every person who lived in the town, alive or otherwise, stretching back over the last eight decades. About the missing man, she could say quite a lot. "He kept his lawn cut," she offered with a certain fondness. "I appreciate that in any neighbor." Then, with a crooked smile, she added, "He was rich, I assumed. We assumed. He bought the house from the Crammers, with cash, and then he didn't work a day in the eight, nine, ten months that he was here with us. Mr. Question just

sat indoors, all day and night, playing with his hobbies. Unless he was out cutting his grass, of course."

"Mr. Question?"

"Yes," the old woman replied.

"That's a rather unusual name."

Sandra considered that assessment. Then with a sneer, she said, "I don't think it's that unusual."

"What was his first name?"

"Deep."

"Deep Question?"

"Yes." The ancient face ended with a pursed set of lips. "What did you say your name was?"

"Morgan. Morgan Lee."

"Now *that's* a very peculiar name!" With a laugh, she asked, "Which web-service did you say you work for?"

She said, "The *New York Times*," with an easy pride.

"I don't particularly like New York."

"Don't you?"

"I have my reasons."

"People are entitled to their reasons."

The old woman was obviously considering spelling out her distastes. Morgan busied herself by studying Sandra's lawn. The spring grass had been slashed down to a thin green fuzz. A concrete statue of Mary stood in the midst of what must have been a little flower garden, but every plant had been sheared off just above the ground, leaving the landscape on the brink of barren. And that was just one of the resident oddities. It was like looking at a drawing inside a child's magazine: How many things were wrong with this picture?

Someone had tied naked dolls to the limbs of a spruce tree.

On the driveway, the image of Satan had been drawn with clumsy strokes of florid red paint.

Every third window on the old woman's house was painted black, while the outside walls were adorned with cheap mirrors and tattered, yard-long strips of aluminum foil.

Sandra herself was dressed in a nun's habit and mismatched bedroom slippers, one gray and one blue. Like the Mary statue, she wore a home-made necklace—the foil wrappers of condoms strung together, using what seemed to be the short cords of tampons.

Up and down the street, every house had its own Mary statue.

"Are you Catholic?"

The old woman bristled, as if insulted. But in the next breath, she relaxed, saying with a gentle smile, "Of course."

"Were you raised Catholic?"

"Lutheran."

"When did you convert?"

"Last year."

"Why?"

The question seemed to go unheard. Finally the woman said, "I have a key, you know. To Mr. Question's house."

"Do you?"

"The police never asked if I had one. They just broke through the front door, not even bothering to knock."

Morgan looked at the empty house.

"Here's my key," she heard. "I keep it on my crucifix chain."

What she called a key, was not. Morgan saw an octagon-shaped piece of apparently ordinary metal. Sandra carefully removed her necklace, untied a key knot, and pulled the octagon free, handing it to Morgan with a ceremonial importance.

"He wanted you to have this," she muttered.

"Pardon?"

"Pardon what?"

"What did you just say, ma'am?"

Sandra gave a low laugh. "Nothing. I didn't say anything."

In her hand, the metal grew warm. Morgan looked at the oddity and then finally thought to flip it over. On the back, in neat handwritten numbers, was a set of precise coordinates.

"You can see in his windows, if you want," the newborn Catholic reported. "Not that the police left anything to see."

Mr. Question's yard was badly overgrown. Young trees had sprouted up from the shaggy grass. No one had cut the lawn, at least for a year and probably for two. Yet even as she pulled her feet through the tangles, the old woman remarked with an undiluted pride, "I don't know how he keeps it so short now. The grass, I mean. When he hasn't been here in forever."

"It's a mystery," Morgan allowed.

The abandoned house was ringed with yellow tape, sheets of laboratory plastics stapled over the windows. Warning signs spoke of undefined hazards. Yet the authorities had done little to maintain the scene's integrity.

Morgan asked, "Did they wear suits when they went inside?"

"Like spacesuits, yes."

"Didn't that worry you?"

"I've seen worse in my life."

Hopefully not. But the reporter said nothing, peering into a convenient window, looking at an empty room stripped of its furniture and carpeting, every piece of sheetrock pulled free to expose the studs and old-fashioned wiring.

"Is this where he kept his hobby equipment?"

Sandra glanced through the window with an incurious expression. "Yes, it was. I'm sure."

Quietly, Morgan asked, "Is everybody in this town Catholic?"

"Of course."

"I think that's interesting, Sandra."

"I don't."

Morgan nodded and backed away from the house.

"Don't you want to use the key?"

For many reasons, Morgan wanted to run away now. But there was no overt danger. The best available tools had been applied to every suspicious object, not to mention the air and shaggy grass and the local

groundwater. Whatever was here had done its work and then vanished. Nothing remained but odd beliefs and habits that seemed to threaten no one.

Morgan walked back to the street, pausing beside her rental car. She hesitated. She was about to tell Sandra, "Thank you," but something nagged at her. "How much for the cookies?" she asked. "The ones he ordered?" Then, after she dug out her money, she happened to look up at the old woman's house. It was one of the oldest homes in town, and standing in the backyard, at the end of a long Satan-decorated driveway, was an equally old garage. The garage must have begun life as a carriage house; it was almost as big as Sandra's home. For no clear reason, Morgan asked, "Do you drive anymore?"

"No, I do not."

"What's inside your garage?"

"I don't remember."

"No?"

"And I don't care," she added.

A cold terror ran up the reporter's spine. Then with a quiet voice, she asked, "Did the authorities search your garage?"

"They looked everywhere," Sandra promised.

"How about the people wearing the spacesuits?"

"No, they were inside Mr. Question's house. It was the others who were draining our blood and shaving our hair." The old woman cackled at the memory of that officious panic. "Why? Do you want to look inside my garage?"

"Maybe I already did," Morgan allowed.

The witness started to say, "I don't understand." But her voice fell to silence after "I don't . . ."

"Thank you for your help, ma'am."

"He was a fine, fine neighbor," Sandra had to remark.

"Mr. Deep Question—?"

"Yes." She smiled in an odd way, and then added, "If I was a young woman, like you, I think I'd like to sleep with him."

"Really?"

"A handsome young man like that? Why not?"

Morgan shrugged. Dropping into her car, she confessed, "Now that's odd. I don't remember him being handsome."

Every residence in the little town had its Mary statue with a condom necklace and naked dolls in the trees and every third window painted black. But what had seemed infinitely strange an hour ago was becoming a little less strange. After another few days, mused Morgan, she would grow accustomed to these arbitrary oddities. But she didn't want to linger. She drove to the main street and then out to the highway. Her companion was waiting at the roadblock. A big man with a crew cut and nebulous ties to the government, he asked, "How did it go?" When she said nothing, he opened the passenger door and climbed inside, and not for the first time, he reminded her, "This is supposed to be a symbiotic relationship."

Morgan nodded agreeably.

"Did you find out anything?"

"Did anyone search Sandra's garage?"

"That's his neighbor, right?" He consulted a string of files, and, after a moment, began to laugh in a low, bitter fashion. "Yeah, it was checked."

"What's funny?"

His name was Clark, and that was about all that she knew about him. That and he had a nice smile. "Every team searched that garage."

"Okay," Morgan said. Then again, she asked, "What's funny?"

"Only *one* team was supposed to. But since *everyone* filed a report . . . well, that implies something funny. . . ."

"Okay."

Clark looked at her for a moment.

Morgan said, "Fargo," and the car accelerated to better than a hundred miles an hour—the best it could manage on the little two-lane highway. Then she showed her companion the octagonal disk. The metal still felt warm, but the coordinates had vanished. Yet that was no problem since she could remember them clearly, and probably would for the rest of her life.

"It's not Alabama," he realized.

Alabama should have been the next site. Last spring, Mr. Deep Question had moved from Minnesota to another little hamlet of no significance. He had changed his name to The Meme Man, and, after a stay of barely six weeks, he'd left again. It wasn't until some months later that health authorities finally took notice: One hundred and six residents of the little community were digging a hole. With nothing but cupped hands, they had managed to excavate a pit almost thirty feet deep. They couldn't explain why they were doing the work, nor did they wonder why, but they had done their digging with such a single-mindedness that their fingers had worn down to the proverbial bone.

That was the first site to hit the public radar.

"But this one's new," Clark admitted. "It's in northern New Mexico, in a wilderness area."

"So we have to walk in," she joked.

To his credit, her companion laughed. "The plane will take us to Albuquerque, and there'll be a helicopter waiting."

Morgan hated helicopters. Or did she?

"Learn anything else?" he asked.

"Not that I know of."

Clark nodded, his expression thoughtful and rather caring. He looked at Morgan without trying to stare. She could almost hear him thinking, Had she triggered any booby-traps? Were any new, unsuspected memes coursing through her blood now? But those were just the obvious questions. More subtle and considerably more paranoid possibilities loomed for both of them.

Remembering his job, Clark said, "You have to tell me. Everything."

"What is 'everything'?"

A fair question. But he managed to shrug, saying, "Nobody's comfortable with this arrangement. But your old boyfriend is responsible—"

"Fifteen years ago, he was my boyfriend."

"Sure. But he sent the government your name. 'I'll reveal myself only to Morgan Lee,' he promised."

Mr. Deep Question. The Meme Man.

"Dan," she said.

"Dr. Daniel Abrams Pitt," Clarke said. And then with a bitter little laugh, he added, "The Scourge of the World."

Morgan and the scourge had dated during their sophomore year at Stanford. And like every old boyfriend, Dan had come back into her life in the most awkward way imaginable. Barely three days ago, one of the senior editors at the *Times*—a powerful figure that Morgan hadn't spoken to twice in ten years—wandered into her cubicle, cleared her throat with an ominous rattle, and then whispered, "Hey. What do you know about tailored memes?"

"Nothing," Morgan replied.

"No?"

Actually, she knew more than most of the world. But the sciences were no ticket to promotions in her business. Politics and corruption had been her field for the last several years, and she was wrestling with three different stories, none of them panning out quite as well as she had planned.

"I thought you had a biochemical major," the editor countered.

"I switched majors, and schools," Morgan explained. Then an instinct finally took hold, and, looking up from her notes, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"I can't tell you," the editor replied, wincing for a moment. "But I've got the government waiting in my office right now, and they want to talk to you."

Clark was one of the suits. The other half-dozen souls had come from the FBI and CIA, and the president had sent her assistant secretary of defense. But for reasons never made clear, Clark did most of the talking. He introduced himself, shook her hand with his own warm paw, and then asked the editor's question once again. "What do you know about tailored memes?"

"Very little," she replied.

"Don't be modest," he'd warned. Then he produced copies of a series of articles that she had written five years before. "Deactivated herpes simplex viruses allow the researchers to send complex proteins across the blood-brain barrier," he read aloud. "The proteins borrow the aggressive features of prions, but without the usual hazards. The proteins unfold and interact with the neurons, and the mind acquires a new idea or concept—what is called a meme—in a matter of minutes."

"Is this about Alabama?" she asked.

Clark said, "Do you know anything about Alabama?"

"People there like to dig holes. Don't they?"

"Pits," he said.

But that wasn't what he said, of course. He said, "Pitts," and waited for her reaction.

Morgan didn't notice the pun. Why would she? Staring at the important faces, she had to wonder aloud, "What do you want from me?"

Everyone was silent.

"I heard about some people in one of the Dakotas," she confessed. "South or North? I don't know much geography—"

"That's Minnesota," Clark reported. "Did you hear about the apartment building outside San Francisco?"

"What building?"

"Everyone who lived there two winters ago—every last one of them—now speaks a fluent Mandarin brand of Chinese."

"I hadn't heard that one."

"By tonight, it'll be the lead story everywhere." Clark glanced at the editor, winning an agreeable nod. Then he looked back at Morgan, asking, "Are you worried?"

"A lot of things worry me."

"Someone's spreading memes across the country—"

"That's one speculation," she allowed. "But two, now three places . . . I don't know, there could be other explanations. . . ."

"Such as?"

She shook her head. "If you want an expert's opinion, I'm going to disappoint you. I haven't read the literature in years. But what I remember . . . there were a lot of mountains between what was possible and what we're seeing today. The most impressive result was a human volunteer who hated broccoli until he was treated with huge doses of one meme, and then he had a mild, temporary fondness for the vegetable." She paused significantly. "In other words, the technology was about as impressive as hypnosis."

"Eighty-nine adults and thirty children," Clark rumbled. "And a little more than a year and a half later, every last one of them suddenly began speaking Chinese as their primary language."

"Do they live in that apartment building now?"

"Many do," Clark allowed. "But others have moved, sometimes across the country."

"The meme was implanted eighteen months ago," blurted one of the FBI men. "But it remained dormant until now."

"You're sure?"

Men and women nodded with authority.

"Why come talk to *me*?" Morgan made herself laugh. "I haven't been in California for years."

"College," said Clark.

She felt her heart kick. Adrenaline coursed through her own mind, generating a moment of utter clarity. Then with a low, firm voice, she said, "No."

Clark leaned toward her. "A friend of yours used to live in that building."

"Pit," she muttered. And then, "Pitt?"

"Two winters ago, he paid his landlord two years' worth of rent and vanished." Clark produced a series of photographs showing a cramped one-bedroom place. Whoever lived there had slept on the floor in the living room. The bedroom was stripped of furniture and carpeting, the naked boards of the floor stained by chemicals and scarred by at least one brief fire.

"It can't be," Morgan said.

"What can't be?"

She decided to say nothing.

"He left a message behind," Clark allowed. "In the bathroom, taped to the mirror."

She was handed another photograph. In a glance, she read a note written on the same kind of yellow legal pad that Dan always used for doodling and all of his important work. "If you want me," said the flowing letters, "then send Morgan after me. I won't reveal myself to anyone else." Then he signed his name, left a spot of his own blood on the paper, and wrote down an exact location.

"This can't be," she kept muttering.

"It obviously *is*," said the FBI man. "He singled you out—"

"No," she interrupted. Then she looked at the smartest, most open face in the room. "Dan hated the meme technologies. The last time I talked to him . . . on the phone, I don't know, three years ago—?"

"Not quite that long ago," the FBI man said.

She ignored him. "Dan thought these were very dangerous technologies," she told Clark. "Evil, really. The world was risking oblivion if people didn't stop playing with these awful new toys." She hesitated for a moment, and then added, "I can't see him being involved in this."

"Give us someone else then," said a CIA man.

Clark gave everybody a quick warning stare. Then, with a shamed little smile, he told Morgan, "We have our marching orders. You'll be given every resource, starting now. This minute."

Morgan concentrated, trying to make sense of this unexpected tangle.

The FBI man mistook her silence for doubt. "The president herself wants you to help your country, and your world."

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"That's not what . . . the problem is . . ."

Clark understood enough to ask, "What is the problem, Ms. Lee?"

"If someone . . . Dan or anybody else . . . if they made this much progress between five years ago and two years ago . . ."

The room waited for her to complete her thought.

With a heavy sigh, she asked, "What if he's made even *more* progress? If he has genuinely mastered this power . . . this force . . . what could he have accomplished by now, and really, what can any of us know for sure. . . ?"

The helicopter hovered over a green meadow. No human was visible, or any trace of human activity. A platoon of Rangers had arrived first, using tiny robots to sweep the ground for contaminants. None were found. Then they took up positions in the nearby woods, and through their crosshairs, they watched the helicopter descend and touch down, two passengers climbing off.

"Nothing," Morgan said hopefully.

Clark said nothing, studying the grass at his feet and then more distant terrain. An outcrop of rock shone in the bright afternoon light, and something bright enough to glitter caught both of their gazes in the same instant.

He looked at her, and nodded.

Morgan went forward. From several strides out, she could see a larger octagon of metal fixed to stone with some kind of glue. "I guess this is it." One of the hidden Rangers called Clark.

"Do I touch it?" she asked.

He was busy talking on the radio. "Which direction are you?" he was asking. Then he turned, looking downwind. "How many?"

The metal disk was bare and warm. But when she touched it with her thumb, it grew even warmer, and, after a few moments, the blood from her thumb found its way to her head, another global position implanted in her mind.

The herpes virus had been replaced with doctored buckyballs. That was one of many improvements made over the last few years. By Dan, or others? Morgan couldn't feel sure about anything. Not even the most ordinary thought in her head felt reliable, much less trustworthy, and even her doubts were cause for a certain rabid suspicion.

She began to turn, ready to tell Clark about the new position. Then she saw the black bear coming across the meadow, running hard. She heard the animal panting and saw the glazed wildness of its eyes, its big body racing past both the helicopter and Clark without even a cursory glance. He pulled a pistol from under his jacket, but he decided not to fire. Instead, he watched as the bear pulled short of Morgan, sniffing the air as if smelling something wondrous, and then dropping and rolling on its back like a dog desperate to prove its devotion.

Moments later, again from downwind, a dozen mule deer arrived.

Mice and ground squirrels came from the surrounding meadow, but their little legs made for a longer, more arduous pilgrimage.

Within minutes, hundreds of animals had gathered around Morgan. Each drank in her scent and purred in some oddly endearing fashion, and

she found herself close to tears—from fatigue and nerves and a strange sweet pleasure—as she walked through the milling bodies, trying not to crush the tiniest vole as she slowly, slowly started to make her escape.

Daniel Pitts was not a particularly good-looking man. What passed for an attraction came from his personality, which was intense, and his style in bed, which was equally intense. Being a certified genius wasn't a bad credential, either. Morgan hadn't been the first coed lured by brilliance, and since college she had met and occasionally dated other Great Minds—a pool of experience that taught her that little Danny wasn't nearly as arrogant as he had seemed, or as condescending, or half as boring as his arrogant, condescending peers.

"I want to win the Nobel Prize," he had admitted on several occasions. "Know why? Because I want to refuse it. Make a big public splash when I tell them to leave me the hell alone."

"You wouldn't," she told him. But when he refused to back down, she said, "You're just trying to be difficult, Danny."

"Exactly. Isn't that the point?"

"But what's the good in refusing the Prize?"

"I'd find some reason," he promised. "A cause. A rallying cry." Then he laughed at his girlfriend, reminding her, "There's always a cause that needs a champion. I'll refuse for the sake of the hungry or the ignorant. I'll use the podium to focus attention on someone who really needs it."

"You can't do that as a Nobel Laureate?"

"Name last year's winners," he countered.

But she couldn't, of course.

Morgan was spending a lot of time remembering moments like that. Some years later, in one of their last conversations, Dan warned, "This is very dangerous work. Don't attribute the quote to me. We're just two old friends meeting for lunch. But I think you should know: This meme-implanting technology is more dangerous than a mountain of plutonium."

"And you happen to work with this mountain," she countered.

"I'm just one of many," Dan muttered to his salad. More than ten years had passed since their break-up. Judging by appearances, his sexual intensity had dissolved into a belt of fat around his waist, but his emotional intensity had grown more focused, more tiresome. "You know who's the biggest funder of the research, don't you?"

"The defense industry."

Stabbing at the spinach, he said, "They pay well for good work."

"Are you going to tell me about your work?"

Dan seemed to consider the question, and then he said, "Yes."

She waited.

His gaze lifted. "Later."

She remembered prompting him by saying, "I've got deadlines."

"Isn't that an awful, ominous word?" he asked, touching her hand with one of his. "Deadline."

Morgan waited, nibbling at her own buffalo burger. When she felt she had nothing to lose, she agreed with him. "It is an ominous word." Then she told him, "We can't do very much. With meme-implanting, I mean."

His salad must have been fascinating, judging by how he was staring at it.

"I don't understand," Morgan confessed.

"What don't you understand?"

"Why did you break up with me?"

Dan looked up, smiling softly. She remembered a plain man, balding and a little heavy. But his considerable burdens seemed to lift suddenly, a boyish energy mixed with the whispered question, "Is that how you recall things, Morgan? That I broke up with you?"

Next was a Marriott in São Paulo where the scourge of humanity had stayed for a single night, and, during that interval, the staff and every guest acquired a desperate, mostly secret fondness for Finnish poetry. When confronted with his odd hobby, the night manager laughed as if embarrassed, turned to Morgan, and after quoting an obscure passage about snow and bliss, he handed her a piece of paper. The paper had been torn from one of the hotel's complementary tablets, cut into an octagon, and in Daniel's handwriting, it showed a new set of coordinates.

In a Chilean helicopter, she and Clark swooped down on a small mining town high in the Andes, discovering people of no great education or wealth who had mastered the basics of high physics. Not only that, every adult and child spent their free time attempting to enrich uranium from local supplies. It was all very crude and exceptionally slow, and after a thousand years, their descendants would have had only a marginal chance of success. But they calmly explained that whenever they finished their offering, tomorrow or in a million years, they intended to gather around the holy object, using its fireball to let them walk to their Lord.

The next destination was waiting for them in the mine's main office.

That night, racing across the Pacific at mach two, Clark got word of a new site. "We're passing over it right now, in fact."

Morgan saw nothing but ocean on the plane's monitors.

"Easter Island," he explained. "A few months back, the natives started carving new heads out of the black rock. Tourists assumed it was a demonstration project—"

"Did Dan visit there?" she interrupted.

"Not that anyone can tell." He stared at her for a moment, and then stared harder at his own big hands. "Which may be the point, of course. Commercial airliners take in fresh air all the time, and the old stuff is bled out into the stratosphere . . . ending up everywhere, eventually. . ."

The next stop was an abandoned settlement in the Australian outback.

The local whites had left their traditional homes, now living happily in the desert, subsisting on a diet of kangaroos and termites.

In China, there was a village where every morning, at dawn, people congregated to sing selections from *The Sound of Music*.

In northern India, a female tiger entered a certain village at nightfall, and every human male gave her gifts of raw meat and then attempted to make love to her.

In one corner of Kenya, corruption at every level of government had suddenly vanished.

A Swiss village was the next site, and an entire day was invested trying to decipher what was wrong. Morgan interviewed more than a dozen locals, finding nothing. Their beliefs were bland, their politics reasonably conservative, and every English speaker had the appropriate accents. But while she was in the mayor's home, she noticed a child's drawing fastened to the refrigerator, and on a whim, she asked, "Who drew this?"

"My daughter," the mayor said with a genuine pride. "Only seven, but look at the details."

It was a seven-year-old's drawing, and the artistry was minimal. But Morgan nodded as if agreeing, and then asked, "What's wrong with it?"

The mayor pushed her face up to the crayon image. "Nothing."

"I know she's your daughter," Morgan persisted. "But if you look at the colors of the mountain—"

"Yes?"

"And the sky. Do you see what I'm saying?"

The woman shook her head, puzzled by the silly questions.

"Come outside," Morgan suggested. Then when they stood before the Alps, she asked, "What's the sky's color?"

"Blue." Laughter. "What else would it be?"

Daniel Pitts had spent several months in the village, slipping away just three weeks ago. Besides rearranging the color perceptions of several hundred people, he had done nothing. The tiny house that he rented was full of odd equipment that meant little. "Our best assessment," Clark explained, "is that whatever he was doing, he had finished his work in Minnesota. Inside that old woman's garage."

They were flying across the Atlantic, chasing nightfall. Their little hyperplane was skimming at the brink of space, and the crew was locked inside the cockpit, and the two of them were sharing the little foldout bed. After more than a week of living together, under constant pressure and with everything at stake, this arrangement had become both a comfort and a surprising joy.

"What do the experts think Dan was doing?" Morgan inquired. "His final goal. If he actually has one, I mean."

"That's what I'm asking you. Since nobody else has a good half-assed guess."

She thought about the question, and then she stopped thinking about it. They were flying toward the next coordinates, which happened to be inside Washington, DC. In their wake, secrets were escaping containment. The news media were descending on every odd village and meadow, fueling a panic that couldn't grow worse, yet did. There were demonstrations in every major city, and biohazard suits were selling for a million dollars each, and even the wildest rumors fell short of whatever news leaked out next.

"We used to argue," she muttered.

Clark rolled onto his side, propping his head up with an arm. "You and Danny argued?"

"About a lot of things."

"A stormy relationship. You told me."

She shook her head. "What I mean is . . ."

"Tell me."

"Dan had this trick. I had my position on some issue, and he'd take a different position. On capital punishment, say."

Clark said nothing.

"I was for the death penalty. But Dan argued that it was wrong in every circumstance. In fact, war was wrong, too. Not just because it killed innocent people, but because it killed even the bastards."

"So what?"

"He approved of war. On a later occasion, I remember . . . he came out for that little fight in Honduras that I thought was wrong. . . ."

"You caught him on that?"

"I called him a two-faced liar. But do you know what he said? 'The purpose of an argument isn't to give your position,' he told me. 'It's to change your opponent's mind.'"

Clark scratched his jaw, watching her.

"Who are you?" she blurted.

"Who do you think I am?"

Morgan touched the hard, masculine face and ran a hand through the thick stubbly hair. Her breathing quickened. Her mind raced. A wild, almost intoxicating panic took hold of her throat. Then once again, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Sleep," was his advice.

And despite all of her anxieties and a mountain of half-remembered nonsense, she closed her eyes and fell asleep.

They reached Washington in time for the vote. With an unheard of speed, Congress had drafted and passed sweeping laws that would outlaw all kinds of meme-transfer technologies, and, standing in the Oval Office as an honored guest, Morgan watched the president pick up a long pen, smile at the cameras, then sign the legislation with an officious fury.

Within the day, every government in the world produced the same laws, almost word for word. But even more impressive was the ease—the perfect smooth inevitability—that swept over every sentient mind. Suddenly nobody was interested in the dangerous technologies, and everyone felt secure in that assessment, and what had been a panicky atmosphere just two days ago was now a business-as-always approach.

"Implanted memes did it all," Morgan said.

Clark was sitting beside her on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial. They were holding hands. But he shook his head, offering, "First, people had to be made open to the sanctions. Everyone had to see for themselves that this is the only reasonable course to take."

"But the memes helped," she said.

"Ideas have always fueled our lives," he countered.

She waited a moment, and then screwing up her courage, she asked, "Why me? What's my role in this?"

"What do you think your role is?"

"As a witness, maybe. Someone who can write about what really happened. If not today, then someday."

"Maybe you're right," he allowed.

"Or maybe the genius simply missed my company, maybe."

He shrugged and laughed quietly.

She had always liked that laugh. It was a funny and reassuring little thing to remember now.

"What do you really think?" she asked.

He almost looked at her. Then he took another pull on the beer tucked inside a brown sack, and with a big boyish grin, he asked, "Think about what?"

"Meme-transfers," she said. "Do you really believe they're evil?"

"Not always, no."

"Do you think there's never any place in society for the quick and easy dissemination of knowledge?"

"I think there're going to be times where this technology could be used, and we'll miss not having it."

"But we can't work with it. Even in secure labs."

"Not for a generation or two." He shrugged. For a moment, he looked like a huge boy, happy and proud, thrilled to have this one person to whom he could throw out a little boast or two. "The argument has been delayed for a few decades. That's all. But if we could have debated about when and how to use this magic . . . well, some of us would have inevitably taken the permissive ground, and the results would have been too awful to bear, I think. . . ."

"Here I sit," she purred, looking up at a sky that was blue again. "Next to the world's finest mind."

"Is that what you think?" Danny laughed as if nothing could be funnier. Then he winked at her, saying, "Think again, and you'll see."

Of course.

Isn't that funny?

Until now, until this moment . . . she had forgotten all of that. . . . ○



SKIN DEEP

Mary Rosenblum

In 1988, Mary Rosenblum attended the Clarion West Writers' Workshop. After six weeks living and breathing speculative fiction, there was no turning back. Since then, her short fiction—more than sixty works—has appeared in *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, and a host of anthologies. She has also sold mainstream and magic realism short stories. Ms. Rosenblum has published four SF novels, the first of which won the Compton Crook Award. Currently, she is finishing up a science fiction book. The author has also been a Hugo Award nominee. In her alternate persona as Mary Freeman, she has published four mystery novels, as well as numerous mystery stories in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

I never thought they'd be looking for me when the media crew came through the restaurant door. I didn't even look up from the pot-sink. I mean, why should I? The crowded little floor out there, with its fifteen tables, was the hot new review in the *Times* these days, so there was always somebody with a name out there. I was never sure if it was Antonio's pricey wild-harvest-only menu, or if it was just that there were so few tables. It was a bad night anyway. The new salad girl was trying hard not to look at my face when she had to come back to my station. And Presidio and the crew kept sending her back here. It was kind of an initiation thing. I never got the joke. It wasn't like I didn't already know what any woman's reaction was, looking at me.

So I was up to my elbows in saffron-colored dishwater and paella pans when all of a sudden there's light and more noise and bodies than usual in the crowded barely legal little kitchen. And I turn around, dripping greasy yellow suds, and there's this woman with a mic and a couple of walking-camera guys all rigged out in the relay-goggles, getting the "human eye" view. And the woman is pointing the mic at me and babbling something in a loud, bright, talking-head voice. Something about technology and Doctor somebody, and how do I feel?

I feel like crap. I don't own a mirror, not even to shave. I don't need one. Any time I want to see my face, I just have to look at somebody. I get a nice clear reflection of the minimum rebuild work that National Health

did on me. Not pretty. Be glad you never ran into me on a dark night. And I'm used to it; I mean, I can't even remember what I looked like before the fire, but . . . well, I guess it still bugs me. And I'm looking at the camera goggles and thinking I won't even be able to surf the news streams for at least twenty-four hours.

"So, Eric, tell us how you feel about having a normal face again! Are you excited? Has Doctor Olson-Bernard given you an idea of how long it will take?"

Olson-Bernard. The news-head's words finally make it through the fog. He's the dude over at the University Hospital. I filled out the usual forms for some kind of new artificial skin graft—an experimental cloning thing, or something. And there were thirty other people there, too, and a couple were as bad as me, and I guess I just put it out of my head. I've applied for this kind of thing before, but they always tell me that the damage went too deep and you just can't rebuild. But I still go.

"Doctor . . ." I say and I know I sound like it wasn't just my face that got cooked.

The news-head turns with a bright, perfect Euro phenotype smile to the cameras' eyes and starts this spew about the doctor and poor, pitiful me, and how the good doctor is going to give me back my life and all that. I stop hearing her, because there's this hum in my ears and I can feel the pressure of all the eyes, Rinco, Hairy, Spider, and all these guys who look at me every night, but now they're staring like they never saw me before, and the chefs, too, even Domino, the one who groped me that once, and the waitresses, and even a couple of customers looking over their shoulders from the dining room.

"So how do you feel?" News-head jabs her mic at me like it's a police prod.

"I . . . wouldn't know."

She is disappointed.

Antonio finally tells me, kind of testy, to just go home so he can get back to serving dinner. Which is okay with me, because my face feels hard as plastic from all the stares. I tell Presidio, loudly, that I'm going to take a leak, then hop the service elevator to the back entrance and out into the alley, just in case the media's still hanging around. It's raining and the lights are bleeding red and green and yellow into the puddles, and everybody has umbrellas or hats pulled down low, and the taxis and bicycle rickshaws are all over the place, and the cold New York-smelling rain softens my plastic face as I head for the train. I don't even get a second glance from the bored security behind the scanners as I reach the platform, and the car is almost empty for once.

In my walk-up, my online is shimmering with my "urgent mail" screen—a storm hammering the Hawaiian coast, all gray waves, foam, and shredding palm trees. It's daturk, I bet, and sure enough, when I sit down in front and touch in, her words start scrolling across the screen doubletime.

ure all over the newstreams sweetie guess its a slow week, and miniature fireworks explode on the screen, which is daturk laughing. Then she

runs a chunk of stream at me, and before I can blank it, I get to see myself backed up against the pot sink, looking about as cornered as an alley dog. I haven't looked at my face for a long time and the camera light or the angle makes it look bigger than real, flat and a glossy sickly white, like melting candle wax, with stubs for ears, no hair, holes where the nose ought to be, and a twisted grimace. I feel every bite of the chicken curry that Antonio fed the staff tonight.

ges that bigtime doc gonna fix your face good as new.

There's a pause and my screen shows me swirling gray clouds above a mirror-still lake, which is daturk being thoughtful.

he's for real i checked go for it

And daturk is gone leaving a scatter of pink blossoms that drift across the dark screen and settle like snow at the bottom. I don't know what the hell that means and I blank my screen, pissed because I need to be pissed more than that I'm really mad at daturk, who is a major presence on the web and an info broker, I'm guessing, and not a real legal one at that. But the urgent mail screen comes right back up, so I guess it wasn't daturk at all, and it wasn't. It's a formal letter from the hospital where I did the interview, and I have to do a retina scan before I can read it.

In that careful, cover your butt, hard-to-read crap that the legal guys use, the letter tells me that I have been selected to be a participant . . . and all that stuff. There's a taxi password for a free ride, and I'm directed to download a key. I stick a mini CD into the drive and the key burns in. Nine AM, the letter tells me. Show up at the hospital lobby.

It's for real.

I'm . . . scared.

And that's silly, because what the hell have I got to lose? There are a bunch more pages and I'm supposed to retina each one after I read it. They're full of words and numbers and paragraphs I've seen before that mean "you can't sue me" and I snap a retina on each of them without reading a word and send it back. Then I touch up a couple of daturk's links, but she doesn't answer, so maybe she picked up that I was pissed or maybe she's doing whatever she does. It's early, but I don't feel like downloading a book, so I call up some music from one of the fringe sites and listen to somebody mixing oud and clarinet and a hot rhythm section with a Latin flavor, no less. It's not great, but it's better than dodging the newstreams on the web.

The password lets me take one of the sleek new auto cabs, so I don't have to put up with a rickshaw driver looking at me in his mirror, and at the hospital door, I drop the CD in the tray and my retina lets me right through the security lock. Soon as the inner door closes behind me, a yellow arrow lights up on the black matte floor at my feet. Follow the yellow brick road, okay, I'm game. It takes me down a wide hallway, past other zombies shuffling along with their eyes on their own arrows, purple, or green, or blue. Darts, finally, under a wide door made out of some kind of wood-looking material that doesn't feel like wood when I lay my palm on it.

Funny. That's one of the few things I remember from before . . . sitting

with this old guy as he carved at this piece of wood. And he hands it to me, and I feel it like silk, all warm and somehow . . . alive. It was curvy, I guess, but all I remember is his smile, hair like tufts of white cotton, and that wood like felt like an animal's flank beneath my hand. Or a woman's maybe. I wouldn't know.

"Mr. Halsey." The receptionist who buzzed me in smiles, and she's good, because it barely falters. Or maybe she sees a lot like me. "You got our letter. The doctor is with a patient, would you take a seat?"

Doctors are always with a patient when you show up, but her voice is warm, and that little flinch I got when I first came in has gone away and I can almost feel her smile. So I smile back . . . I can sort of do that . . . and pick up one of the nice handhelds racked by the comfy chairs. It offers a bunch of magazines, some stories by Name authors and even a couple of quick thrillers, heavy on the graphics. Not your National Health selection. I touch through them, but the Names I've read and the thrillers don't thrill me. About the time I touch it off, the door opens and the doctor comes out. He's not the one who interviewed me. This guy is tall, so that I have to look up when I get to my feet. He's pretty much your average Euro mongrel type, brown hair, long face, ho hum nose. I always notice faces. Funny. And he doesn't flinch. He smiles. And he *looks* at me. *Really* looks. People don't do that. Their glances skid off my face like leather soles on ice. Meanwhile he's shaking my hand, and before I can turn the thinking part of my brain back on, we're in his office, which is all carpet and grasspaper on the walls, and a real wood desk about as big as my bed. I want to run my hands over it and I don't.

"You got my letter." His smile broadens just a hair. "You're a fast reader."

I shrug. "It could turn out worse?"

Now he shrugs. *My* letter. No doctorial "our" for him. He gets points for that.

"Are you willing to undergo the procedure? You understand that it's still experimental, and although we've repaired more localized damage that is similar in depth of cellular destruction, we haven't actually . . ." He falters for the merest instant.

"Fixed anyone like me," I offer. Helpfully. Belligerently. Okay, I'll admit it.

"Yes." And his eyes are on me, and they're grave, not offended by my petty snap. I feel suddenly . . . small.

"I'm sorry." I look down. Something I don't do much anymore. "Whatever you want to do, *do*." And I am . . . yes, afraid. I hate the feeling. Flinch as the doc puts his hand on my shoulder, want to slap him off.

When was the last time somebody did that? Put his hand on me for no reason? Well, Domino, but that wasn't for no reason and Domino isn't picky.

"Let me show you something." He nods toward the desk top. It has a holo-projector set into the top and a bright blur materializes above it, coalescing slowly into a human head. It's a kid with a bright smile, the kind you see kids give when Mom or Dad points the camera. He has wispy brown hair and blue eyes and a really cute face, and I'm looking and this

hand closes around my insides and squeezes, and all of a sudden I can't breathe any more.

Because it's *me*. I know it, and I don't know why I know it, but I do.

He's . . . pretty. Way off in the distance, I feel the doc's fingers squeezing my shoulder and hear him telling me to sit down, and something bumps the back of my knees and I sort of fall onto a seat, but I can't take my eyes off that kid's face.

"Children's Services had a photo in their file. I've used a modeling program to age that original to the present." The doc squeezes my shoulder again, and the boy's face starts to change and I want to yell stop, but nothing works, so I just sit there frozen and watch him get older. His face lengthens and firms up and his hair goes from wispy to a contemporary buzz and the program even adds a diamond stud to one ear lobe. And his eyes change, too. Oh, they're still a blue that's almost gray, but the expression changes from that happy-kid smile to a look that seems . . . sad. And I wonder if the programmer meant to do that, or if I'm just reading stuff into it that isn't really there. But that's just a trickle of thought, because most of me is . . . numb.

That's how I would look?

"It's going to work." His voice is low, gentle, and his hand is still on my shoulder. "I can't give you proof, because you're the first case where the damage is this extensive, but I *know* it. If I didn't know for sure, I would never have asked you."

He means it. Oh, God, I hear it in his voice, and that face in front of me is so damn beautiful . . . I'm going to start shaking, or crying, or just explode, burst into a scatter of dust in a minute, and it's as if he knows, because he gives my shoulder a final squeeze and steps back. "You'll check into the hospital tomorrow," he tells me. "We've already contacted your employer and he's giving you the time off, with a job return guarantee."

"How. . ." I swallow, try again. "How can you . . . add all that." All the face that isn't there . . . the ears, nose, lips, eyebrows that I see in that holo.

"We're using cloned and modified cell strains," he says. "Using our computer model of how you should look, we'll build a scaffold, layer by layer. That's a three dimensional structure built of microthin layers of a complex mix of biodegradable polyesters loaded with the right enzymes and hormones that trigger cell growth. The scaffold dissolves as the cells grow. We do this kind of thing already, in a big Petrie dish, to make sheets of graft skin . . . you know about that. But in a three-D scaffold, created in place, the cells differentiate to form the appropriate type of tissues and they form in place. No surgery. No implanting. Your face will simply . . . grow back."

I hear passion in his voice and it helps. It cracks some of this numbness that coats me like ice. He *believes* in this. Like it's God, and he's almost touched it.

He turns that look on me, and for once, I don't see my real face in his eyes. I see that face in the holo. And his belief is hot as summer sun.

"I will see you tomorrow," he tells me. "And we'll get started."

I leave. Fast. Go outside, onto concrete and turn left. Start walking. I

walk, and it's all concrete with buildings and people and I don't really see any of it. If anybody looked at my face, I missed it. But after awhile, the city looks pretty much normal again, new and old, fancy and cheap, all layered on top of each other, and some woman with fancy braids does a bad double-take and nearly falls off the curb. I figure out where I am, catch the subway, and go back to the walk-up. I figure I'll download a book, a new one by one of those hot Arab writers, you know, one of those guys that grew up in the forever war zone and knows things that I sure hope I don't ever have to learn, and they're not popular because they mostly don't like anyone who's not Arab, but sometimes, you know, all that anger and hatred makes me jealous. They have someone to hate.

Me, I just have a why-did-this-happen wreck, mom and kid, gas tank catches fire. . . . Act of God? Maybe if I believed in a God I could hate him. Or her. Why am I *thinking* this tonight?

Because I'm scared. And I don't know why. Because what I told the doc was true, what have I got to lose? But I feel like I'm standing on this cliff, and once I jump off, I can't ever get back here. I don't download the book after all. It's Support Night. The reminder pops up on my screen. It's this weekly thing I have to do to keep my Disability. Proves I'm working on living with my face. That I'm not planning on gunning down tourists in Times Square. I have to go. So I do.

It's almost as good as taking drugs. We all sit around in cheap plastic chairs, and various people get up to share their bad week, rude fast-foodie, nasty in-laws, un-loving lover, and we all make supportive noises. There's a core that's really into this, emoting and swaying like they're worshipping this god of disfigurement, and I bet they could get an Oscar. The rest of us . . . we're just there. But there's one kid I really like. Kitten. That's what she calls herself. She's about fourteen, got caught in a gang firebomb thing, isn't as bad as me, but hey, she's a girl, and it's got to feel worse. She remembers when she was beautiful.

I don't. Didn't. Not before today.

We say hi. Her eyes are lavender and she always says she worries about me, and I think sometimes that she means it.

After, I go home and check to see if daturk is around. She isn't, but there's a screen full of rose petals sprinkled over trampled plants with thorns. I don't know. Ask her.

I show up at the hospital and my key still works. This time, the arrow is orange and it leads me to this desk where a chunky North African type hurries me off to a private waiting room with one chair and a sofa. About ten minutes later, this guy in blue scrubs comes in, doesn't look at me, but smiles so hard I worry about his mouth muscles as he hurries me through the labyrinth of corridors, through doors that swing ominously open into air locks ceilinged with the soft lavender glow of microbe killing ultra-UV. He leaves me in a plastic-walled cubicle, hands me the usual disposable hospital open-back, and tells me to strip. A nurse shows up—a she this time—who doesn't look at me either, but at least doesn't smile. She whacks my inner arm with a sprayjector and tells me it'll be just a

little while. It's a heavy sedative. I start to buckle about thirty seconds after she leaves. Then there's a gurney, kids in green who also don't look at me, and before they've pushed me five minutes, the ceiling tiles are swimming across my field of vision. I don't think I'm going to be there when they plug me into the anesthesia machine.

I want to be there.

I'm staring at white and someone is moaning, and I can feel someone wiping my mouth with something rough and scratchy and I can feel my drool, and I realize—sort of—that it's me moaning, only I can't access that *me* to stop it.

I wake up slowly, clutching at this really cool dream of a big field with flowers in it, and I'm walking and just . . . feeling good. It's a long dream. Too long, I think blurrily. I was talking to daturk, but I can't remember what she was saying. She likes flowers. Time to go to work soon. Hope I'm not late. . . . I try to scratch my nose and my arm won't work.

I wake up for real, adrenalin pumping through me because I can't move, all I can see is white light, and *where the hell am I?* And I hear hurrying footsteps, the white light is a ceiling, and I remember where I am.

Hospital. Strapped down. Tubes. My face is bandaged. It's so damn familiar.

The nurse or aide or whatever babbles at me, but I don't listen. Just wait. There's nothing to do but wait.

I'm still sort of drifting in and out when the doc comes in, but it's pretty soon, and he says something sharp to the nurse at the door, and then he's leaning over so I can see his face, and that hand grabs my guts again because he's smiling and his eyes are bright.

It worked.

"You're coming along just fine." He steps aside as two nurses in green scrubs, masks, and gloves move in to bustle around, unplugging drip lines and catheter, doing this and that, the things they do. Finally one reaches for my face and I clench up, because I still remember the pain way back then when they changed the dressings and none of the drugs really stopped it.

But there's no pain, not really, just a little prickly discomfort, and they're not bandages on my face, but more like a gauze mask the shape of a face. The air feels icy cold on my skin, and it's real tender. I think I can feel air molecules bumping against it.

"Can I see?" The words come out a croak, and my throat is raw, so they must have had a tube down me.

The doc hesitates. "It's not finished," he says slowly. "You have to understand that the process of growing many layers of tissue doesn't happen in a few hours. This is just a break to let the new cellular grown stabilize and give you some time to regain a bit of muscle tone before the final session. You have an epidermal layer, but it's temporary. We still have a ways to go."

One of the nurses holds a straw to my lips, I suck automatically and the

taste of the bottled apples on my tongue brings back all the memories of the first time, but it's sweet and soothes my raw throat. "I want to see," I say when I've finished, and I sit up.

Well, I try to.

The room twirls around me and my stomach heaves and next thing I know hands are laying me back on the bed again and I'm clammy and cold and shaking.

"Take it slow," the doctor says, frowning at the bank of monitors next to my bed. Nothing is beeping anyway. I learned a long time ago that's a good sign. "You're going to have to get used to moving again. Don't forget, you've been out for ten days."

"Ten days?"

"It was in that document I sent you." He raises an eyebrow at me, satisfied with whatever the monitors are telling him. "The one you read and retina-stamped? The first session is the longest. The second will finish up the regeneration, and then there will be only a few plastic modifications."

I wonder what else I didn't read? No wonder the dream seemed to go on so long. And I'm gathering the strength to ask again, but he sticks a hand mirror in front of my face, a cheap import thing with a plastic rim and handle, like you might see in any dollar store in the neighborhood, and I look.

I know it's not done, but disappointment still stabs me right in the gut. But I make myself look. It's a lot better. I've got ears now, sort of. And a nose. My face looks like . . . well, a face anyway. Not very pretty, but you won't scream and faint if I run into you in a dark alley. No hair anywhere and the skin is real pink, like I've got sunburn or something. I let my breath out in a long sigh, trying to breathe all that disappointment out with it, because if he quit now, I'd still be a whole lot better off.

I don't want him to quit.

"I want to give you a week to recover." Doc is looking at me thoughtfully. "You should be able to be released by tomorrow morning." He hesitates and he's frowning a little. "Do you have somebody staying with you? Somebody who can look after you while you get your strength back?"

I shake my head and I could swear that he relaxes a bit.

"Tell you what." He smiles. "Why don't you be my guest? I've got plenty of room in my condo. That way I can keep a first hand eye on my handiwork. And the building is secure, so we can keep the media from bothering you."

I start to say no, and it's so automatic that it stops me and I swallow it. Why am I so quick? I study him for a minute, but I can't put my finger on anything. He's no Domino. I'm pretty sure of that. Maybe it's just that . . . nobody *does* that. Just offers. No strings. He's waiting, and I can see that he's getting a little impatient, maybe offended because I didn't jump at his offer. What the hell?

"I'm . . . sorry." I don't have to pretend to be confused because I am. "That's really . . . that's nice of you." I'm groping for the words I'm supposed to say, but hey, I've never really been in this situation before. "Thank you," I finally say, feeling like a boob. But he smiles, his eyes happy.

"That's fine then. You rest, and I'll come by to get you when I get ready

to leave. I shouldn't be here too late." He looks at the nurse now, and I watch all the warmth vanish from his face. He gives her some instructions and I guess I'm supposed to go walk around later, but not too much, and there's some med codes, too.

He goes off and she goes off, but comes back in a little bit to bring me a cup full of pills and a lunch tray with hospital blah on it, Jell-O that looks like green plastic, some of that fake chicken soup, custard. It hasn't changed since I was here the first time, and that was twenty years ago, when I was four. The first taste of custard brings it all back and I lay the spoon back on the tray and lean back, hoping that one of those pills is going to make me sleep. Without dreams.

But it doesn't. So I pull the bedside screen over and get online, and as soon as I get there, I get a screen full of bright flowers, like someone dropped about six bunches from a downtown flower stall on the floor. Bright red script written in a pointed slanty hand spells out the words, *how u doin— sweet so far*. It's daturk's online handwriting. I recognize it, wonder if she's good enough that she's really been hacking my med records or if she's just guessing. I trace the words *Doing sweet. Not done yet* on the screen, watch the words take shape in black shaky script. It's an effort to write that much and I want to let my hand fall. But I make the effort, and trace a few more letters: *Doc invited me to stay with him. I said yes*. And I'm not sure why I told her that, but all of a sudden it seems real important to know what she thinks about it. And it's pointless to stare at the screen, because she may not get back to me for days. But right away, a crimson line starts to curve to life on the screen. I wait expectantly, but there are no words, just a fiery question mark glowing among all the spilled flowers and scattered petals.

I shrug, and I don't know why it bothers me. But I write "it's okay" on the screen and then I really do have to lie flat for a minute or two. And when the ceiling stops moving and I look back up at the screen, all the writing is gone. There are just the flowers, scattered all over.

I kind of feel comforted and I'm not sure why. I guess because daturk seems to be able to get in anywhere, so I guess sometimes I've sort of pretended that she's always there. Just checking in, you know? So I don't worry about it anymore, I'll see what happens when I go home with the doc. I can always catch a cab back to the walk-up if I have to.

So I pull down a new book, some guy who walked across Canada, and it's okay, but the author's trying too hard, and the nurse is happy when I sit up, and even happier when I wobble down the hall and back without her nagging me too much. Hey, I know the drill. I spent a lot of time here, learned that if you do what they ask and don't bug them, they're nice to you, and if you're a pain, they get even, sooner or later.

And about the time they bring in another meal tray that's loaded with food that carries way too much baggage from the past, the doc shows up again. This time, he's not wearing the white doctor suit, just a classic jacket and shirt, no tie, no virus mask, every bit the doc, but smiling and relaxed, like we're old friends meeting for a golf game or something. And the nurse brings me a release to sign and retina and a wheelchair, because they never let you walk out of the building, guess they're afraid

you'll sue if you fall down and break a leg. And it's not too bad walking to the car that the attendant brings up. A car. Well, I guess if you're a doc, you can afford the registration fees and maybe he has to hurry into the hospital for emergencies.

I think it's the first time I've ridden in a car that wasn't a taxi since that day. And it's still real bright out, because it's summer, and the streets are full of after-work crowds out shopping and eating and making eyes, squatting with wireless access screens on the pedestals of statues, on curbs, leaning against storefronts. No reason to be inside except to sleep. We pass them and they don't even look.

The condo is in one of the new towers, with a garage underneath with a gate and a guard with hard eyes. It's fluorescent bright, and the elevator that whisks us upstairs is covered with really clean green carpet, walls, floor, everywhere. No mirrors. I get a little dizzy from the rush. . . . I'm still feeling pretty rocky.

We get off into this little space that's supposed to look like a courtyard, I guess, with a brick path and gravel and a pool, and even the light feels like sunlight, and as the elevator doors close, something *plops* into the pool. A frog? A real one? I want to look, but the doc has his hand on my elbow now and he isn't going to let me stop, I can feel it.

Uh oh. Domino after all?

The door that the brick path leads to opens all by itself, and I only see one other door on the other side of the courtyard space, so this is a pretty fancy place. I'm really shaky now, and I don't much care if the doc is a Domino or not, I just want to sit down somewhere before I pass out, and everything sort of has this too bright, too clear look, like you get just before the black closes in. The room inside is huge, so big I can't really sort it out, it's all windows and light, and I can see blue sky, so we have to be way high, and green leaves and flowers and the sound of water, and the doc is pushing me and I sort of fall down into this chair.

It takes a little bit for the room to come into focus again, and when it does, the doc is holding out a glass, and he's looking a little worried, but not enough to scare me.

"I'm sorry." He pushes the glass a centimeter in my direction. "Take a drink of water."

And I do, and it helps, and I can look around. It's one big room, with a marble-topped kitchen island at one end and a fireplace with fake logs at the other, and chairs and small sofas covered in leather-looking stuff, grouped together, all tasteful soft browns and grays with a few real bright splashes of color. The glass is a greenhouse wall with plants and bright splashy flowers and a little waterfall and rocks. It looks like one of those upscale ads you get hit with online.

"You should get your strength back in a day or two." Doc bustles in the kitchen area. "Juice?" he asks. "I've got just about anything you might want."

"Thanks. Anything is fine."

He brings me a tall glass, like the glass that had the water in it. It's too heavy to be glass, cut into sharp geometric designs. Crystal? The juice is pink and I don't recognize the flavor, maybe something tropical. It helps.

I didn't really eat the hospital stuff and all of a sudden I'm hungry. Doc has shed his jacket and poured a glass of dark red wine, and he's bustling around in the kitchen, not chattering, which I like, but getting out pans and mushrooms and a thick slab of salmon, cooking quickly and efficiently enough that Antonio would only curl his lip and not really sneer. And in a pretty short time, he serves up salmon sautéed in olive oil with some tiny perfect vegetables and fresh pasta and we eat at the small wooden table at the edge of the kitchen space. There's a single flower in a vase on the table and the food is good . . . really good, I mean, as good as what Antonio feeds the family at the restaurant. And I'm starving.

Doc pours me a glass of wine to go with the salmon, a lighter red than he was drinking before, and it's nice, light with a hint of fruit. A merlot? Domino has been teaching me wine, saving the stuff that the customers don't finish, making me pay attention. He may be handsy, but he's an okay guy and he really knows his wine.

"I'll be gone early in the morning." Doc swirls his wine in his glass, his eyes on the darkening city beyond the glass. "Make yourself at home here. Do you mind staying in the condo?" He raises his eyebrows. "I haven't reprogrammed my security, and once you go outside, you can't get back in."

"That's fine." I shrug. "I don't really have any place to go." Then I frown at my own glass, the wine tugging at me. "How come you picked me?" I blurt the words out, and there's this twinge of fear, like he might suddenly realize that he made a mistake. "I mean . . . why me?"

He smiles at me then, just a little. Folds his napkin up and lays it beside his plate. "I was wondering how long it would take you to ask." He leans his elbows on the table. "I looked at a lot of applicants." He's speaking slowly, thoughtfully. "You weren't the only one with this kind of extensive damage." His lips tighten briefly. "I'm not sure exactly what made me choose you in particular. Maybe because the cause was so . . . trivial. Not war, not an act of terrorism . . . just an accident."

He's lying. I feel a small thin sliver of ice in my gut. Oh, yeah, I can always tell. I don't know why. Maybe because I watch people a lot and they most of the time try not to notice me. So they act like I'm not there. But I'm just about never wrong.

And he's lying.

"Look, you really got rushed into this." He picks up his glass of wine. "I don't know who leaked the project to the media, but they really went for the story." He makes a face. "I wanted to get you safely into the hospital before someone interfered. Someone always has a reason. I'm not surprised that you feel a bit overwhelmed."

I run my thumb across the grain of the table, remembering that old man again. "How did you get . . . my picture." My voice is a little shaky in spite of myself.

"I contacted Children's Services." He clears his throat. "I assume they got permission to collect personal effects after your mother . . . after the accident. There was no other family. I'm letting you get too tired. Why don't you come sit?" He nods toward the living room area. "The city is lovely after dark. Or would you rather go straight to bed?"

I don't want to go to bed. If I don't sleep, I'm going to start thinking about this and . . . I don't want to think about this. So I get up and go over to one of the big leather chairs and I don't wobble too much. The view from here really *is* lovely. It's not quite full dark, but the sky is a deep royal blue and the lights spangle the towers and streets with gold and green and red, and the new aerial trams slide like glowing beads across invisible wires, and I've never been this high up in my life. And the doc talks for awhile, real easy, as if we've been friends for a long time. He tells me about medical school and wanting to do this twenty years ago, back when it was just an experimental concept and stem cell research was getting outlawed everywhere, and it looked like this kind of thing—regrowing tissues—would never happen. And his eyes glow when he talks about it, and I think of the old guy with the gaunt face who preaches about his angry god down at the little square near my walk-up, and that's how *his* eyes shine.

I finally start nodding off and I lose track of what he's saying. So he shows me to bed, and it's a room about the size of my walk-up with its own bathroom and a spa tub and a separate shower and windows that look out at a bridge. And from this angle and height, I'm not even sure which bridge it is. And there are two twin beds and a chest, and there's a robe and a new set of pajamas on one of the beds.

"You didn't bring a lot with you," Doc says with a smile. "There are some clothes in the chest and basic stuff in the bathroom. Let me know if you need anything."

"I will," I say, and he says good night and closes the door.

I sit on the edge of the bed, my feet bare, the carpet thick as a mattress under my bare feet. I'm kind of dizzy from the wine and the day and probably all the time I was out while my face was growing back. I finally get up and I go into the bathroom, and I make myself look in the mirror. Yeah. Better. Closer to human. Not there yet, but closer. And there is toothpaste and that kind of stuff, but I just go straight to bed. And it's weird. As I pull the cover up over me, already half asleep, it comes to me that this is somebody's room. Not a guest room. Somebody sleeps here. And I'm not sure why I think that, because there's no other clothes or stuff lying around. But I'm sure of it.

I wake up late, and for a minute, I can't remember where I am, and then it all comes back to me. And I can't help it. I go into the bathroom, first thing, and I look at my face. And the doc is gone and I prow around. I don't know why I thought this was somebody's room. There's nothing to show. Clothes in the drawers all new, all my size. Expensive stuff, like I was a doc, too. It kind of creeps me out that they're there, but I put them on because my crummy pants seem wrong in this fancy place, like they might rub off somehow, stain the furniture. And I really feel . . . different now. Like I'm changing and not just my face. I jumped off that cliff, that's for sure. There's a screen in the bedroom and I try it, but a polite woman's voice tells me that I don't have the password to get online, but there's a separate library link and I can download books without a password. And I want to talk to daturk, but I settle for that book I started in the hospital, and by the time the doc arrives, I've finished it.

The evening is strange, nice and somehow creepy at the same time. Doc fixes another really fine dinner, and there's wine, and he asks me about what I've read and we talk—and you know, I've never talked about what I read to anybody but daturk. He's smart. Well, I guess you got to be, to be a doc, huh? And he asks me about school and gets all thoughtful when I tell him about doing all the online courses I could get from the state. Then he starts talking about the benefit of in the flesh classes, and how maybe I want to do that when I'm done with the medical stuff and that would be fine.

But he forgets how I live.

That takes real money.

And when I ask him about online, he sort of waves the question away, saying something about security and changing it is a pain. And just as I'm getting ready to go to bed, I remember and I ask him who used to sleep in the bedroom. He gets quiet, and I know right then I said the wrong thing. Then he says nobody.

He's lying again.

It goes on like this, and it's nice. Like the support group . . . only he really talks. Most of them don't, except for Kitten. I go back to the hospital, and this time the session is short, and I'm not so whacked when I wake up. I come back to the condo after the second treatment. Doc doesn't even ask me. He just shows up, and I'm not so shaky this time. I guess this session didn't take as long. I didn't dream as much, but I saw the old man again, and this time he held my hand around the blade of his knife and I felt such *pride* as the first pale sliver of wood curled back over my knuckles. There are no scars on those hands. They're all smooth. So it's from before, but I knew that. I wonder who the old guy is. My grandfather? I stretch for some kind of memory, but all I get is a picture of those small smooth hands and that pride and the curl of blonde wood.

"I brought this home." Doc pulls a mini CD out of his pocket after dinner one night. "I thought you might want to see what I'm doing."

It's creepy, watching it. I sit in one of the chairs with my knees up under my chin and watch the cold arch of the machine crawl back and forth across my face. That's all you can see—my face—the rest is all green sheets and hot light. Tubes and wires connect the silver arch of the machine to something I can't see, and it runs on a kind of track, like a train, you know? And I guess he edited it some, because this is days and days, right? Weeks. But the machine zips back and forth and it maybe takes a half hour to watch . . . my face grow. On one pass, the machine squirts out this pale stuff . . . the scaffold, Doc calls it. Then it goes back again and sprays pinker stuff over . . . the cells. And they grow and then the machine sprays on more scaffold. . . .

It keeps crawling back and forth and my face . . . grows. There's a little hump where most people have a nose and then it's more of a hump and it gets bigger and arches and I've got cheeks and lips and . . .

"After you were anaesthetized this time, we used an enzyme to dissolve the temporary dermal layer that was in place." Doc is leaning forward, staring at the screen. "So that the new layers of tissue could bond seamlessly."

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I think about lying there on that table unconscious, my skin melting away. I've never dreamed about the fire, but now I shiver, and for a moment I think I'm going to be sick.

On the screen, the silver, tube-trailing machine crawls back and forth, and my nose looks like . . . a nose.

I touch it. It juts out of my face. I can't quite get my mind around that feeling. On the screen, the silvery arch slides back and forth and back again, growing my face, one layer of cells at a time.

Living with the doc is kind of strange. It's like a dream that I can't quite wake up from. I think I've figured out what this is all about by now. It's starting to feel okay to be there in that room that was somebody's. It's kind of like jail, too, I guess, because I still can't get online and I can't leave. I can, but we both know that if I do, it wrecks something. And I feel like a part of me I can't really get inside of is having a conversation with Doc, and *I'm* not part of it, and this sounds really nuts, I know. But it's okay.

I want to talk to daturk about it.

And one night, I dream that my face is talking to me and it scares the crap out of me, because if my face is out there talking to me, what is on the front of my skull? And I wake up yelling, and the doc is there, putting his arms around me, holding me, and just sitting there until I fall asleep again. And this time, I dream about this woman and she's looking down at me and crying and she has red hair, and I wake up knowing that this is my mother, and I've never dreamed about her before. Not once.

Why is she crying? I try to remember and I can't.

My face is wrong. I don't know how I know. But I do. When I tell Doc, he tells me it's normal. The feeling will go away after awhile.

He's not lying this time.

Two more sessions to go. I look like a painting that's not quite finished yet. And when I look in the mirror, this stranger looks back at me. I don't think he likes me.

I dream about the old man a lot. I'm pretty sure he's my grandfather. He lets me carve a piece of wood, holding my hands in his and mine are very small. I dream about my mother, too. And I dream about her crying again, and sometimes, there is all this white light and stuff that means . . . hospital. How could she be in the hospital? She died in the car, before I went there.

Didn't she?

Didn't she?

The doc talks about my staying here with him after, about going to college. He talks about having no kids, and money, and why have it if you don't use it? There's a story about this, real old . . . a man who carved this statue and then it came to life and was his perfect lover. I guess that's what Doc's doing, with all his talk about college and my staying with him. Like Domino after all . . . but you know? It's an okay trade. Really. It is.

But I still feel like I'm living in a dream and my face still looks at me like I'm a stranger. And there's no reason to say no, so I don't know why I don't say yes right then. But I can't. Not out loud.

Doc thinks that means yes, I guess. I don't know.

And I ask him if my mother might still be alive and he looks at me real strange. "No," he says. And he's not lying.

And then daturk finds me.

I'm downloading a book and the screen lights up with a storm of wind and yellow leaves swirling around in what looks like a miniature tornado. *gd security but not gd enough*. Green words swirl with the wind and then the screen is full of fireworks—daturk laughing. *u ok?*

"Yeah," I can say the words out loud because this is a sweet system and does voice. I wonder what the wind and leaves mean. "I couldn't get out. Doc's paranoid about security."

The gray clouds and mirror lake appear. She's being thoughtful. *u gonna b pretty?* she finally asks.

"Yeah. But . . . I don't think he's got the face right." The words just blurt out. I haven't even said them in my head. Not really. "It doesn't look right. And he says that's normal—even the plastic patients feel that way—but I don't know. It's like I'm looking at someone else. Maybe he . . . got the wrong picture." But the kid I saw . . . that smiling one. I remember how it twisted my insides. Nah. He didn't get the wrong picture.

On the screen, clouds and lake. No words.

"Something doesn't feel right." And when I say that, it really smacks me. Because it doesn't. And I've been telling myself that it's just me and everything is really all right, because it *is*.

And I don't want to talk any more, but I missed daturk a lot and I don't want to lose her either. "Can you get in again?" I say, and I get a handful of sunflowers tumbling across the screen. That's a yes. Then she's gone. She's always really good at reading me. I don't know how you do that in digital, but she does. And I feel better . . . and realize all of a sudden that I've been feeling bad.

And Doc is gone, and I'm supposed to go in tomorrow for the final session, and when it's all over . . . it's a long one again, I guess . . . I'll . . . be done. I walk through the condo, out to the little jungle that grows under the glass wall, kind of framing the city. It looks so beautiful up here. You can't see the ugly stuff down there. I wonder what it's like to live for years and years up above all the people who wash the dishes and panhandle and rob. I mean, I've been up here for a couple of weeks now, but it's not like I live here. It's more like I'm walking around in a dream, and any day I'm going to wake up and it'll be time to go eat the spicy curries that Antonio feeds us and wash the paella pans and taste wine with Domino. I hold my hands out and look at them. Doc says he'll fix them, too, but they work and . . . I don't know. I think I don't want him to. I run my thumb over some of the shiny white skin and it feels hard like plastic. I don't want to be perfect. And I think about the old man again and the little-boy hands and that pride. Twenty years ago. No family, Doc said, so I guess he's dead. Like my mother?

I turn my back on the city . . . I don't know it from up here . . . and I go down the short wide hall, and I go into Doc's room. I haven't been in here before, just looked in. It's dim, because silk drapes that match the silk quilt on the big bed kind of shut out the light, and the quiet furniture makes me think of my grandfather stroking that satiny wood and showing me how to hold a knife. I can smell Doc—a rich musky odor of flesh and some kind of scent, like he's really here, maybe hiding in the closet, and the back of my neck prickles.

I've never snooped in here. Honest. I could have. Looked to see what he hides in his sock drawer. But I haven't.

I'm not sure why I'm doing it now. I should just turn off the brain and go download a book, and wait for the final session, I guess. But I'm walking over to the dresser and I don't think I could stop myself, it's like I'm two people, and right now the other one is running the muscles. I don't find anything in the drawers, or the drawers of the night stand. There's a remote for the wall vid and music system. Clothes. Some pills with no labels. Tissues. That kind of thing.

It's in the closet, flat against the wall up on a shelf, stuffed behind a stack of silky folded sheets or blankets or something. A picture. It's not a holo base, but a flat frame with a digital photo printed out on real old fashioned glossy paper, as if it came from an antique camera. But maybe it really did. The Doc is fifty at least, probably more, if his plastic buddies have worked on him.

My hand is shaking. As if the part of me pulling the muscle-strings has already figured it out. But I guess *I* haven't. Because when I take the picture over to the window and pull aside the drapes, my mind is empty. I just stand there, staring at the face in the picture, not thinking anything. Just staring.

Years ago . . . in another life . . . I sat in a chair and watched that laughing kid face that stabbed me in the gut lengthen and firm up and grow older. He stares up at me right now from the slick surface of the picture, his hair in a military buzz with a diamond stud in one ear lobe, and his eyes are a blue that's almost gray, and he seems . . . sad.

It's some kind of formal thing, like graduation but not military 'cause there's no uniform, just a blue shirt with a collar. There's another picture under this one. I can just see the edge and I kind of pry the frame apart and slide it out. It's the same kid. Younger, or maybe just grubbier. He's in a canoe that looks like it's made from real wood. It's floating on this gorgeous lake, kind of like daturk's thoughtful lake.

Doc's in the canoe with him. The kid's smiling for the camera and Doc's smiling at the kid.

I was wrong. About what Doc is doing.

It's his son.

You can see it in his face.

I wonder what happened.

I slide that picture back where I found it and I feel . . . slimy. Like I've been hiding, watching him have sex. I feel . . .

. . . I'm not sure how I feel.

But now I know.

I go into the bathroom in the room I've been sleeping in. *His* room. That's who I've been feeling. I stand in front of the mirror. I haven't looked at my face yet. Oh, I've *looked*. I watched the vids with Doc. I saw it *happen*. But I've just sort of inventoried it before this . . . I kind of skid over seeing the whole thing. It's like my face in the mirror is ice, and I can't get my footing.

But now, I *look*. I stand in front of the mirror and I don't let my shoulders turn, my face duck, my eyes slide. Nah, I look. Like I'm meeting me on the street, on the way to Antonio's to scrub the paella pans. Interesting guy. What do you think of him? What's his past? I want to shake, and I kind of slap myself inside my head, you know? Hey. Look at him. He's walking down the street, so *look* at him. And I do.

He's ugly. That's all. Just *ugly*. I mean, his face is kind of too bold, too bald. Not really formed quite right, you know? It should be . . . dunno . . . more *defined*. Maybe his mom ate something wrong or drank the wrong water when she was pregnant or something. And I remember one year way back, when I was in this kind of homey place for kids, like a real house. It wasn't just us burn kids, it was some others, too, and their faces weren't damaged. . . . They just weren't quite faces yet. And they had other problems, too. But that's what I see. I'm not normal, but you know. . . .

I'm just some guy that doesn't look normal.

Not a monster. Not somebody where all you can think is *ohmygod-whathappenedtohim?*

I end up on my knees on the floor and I'm goddam crying, my tears are leaking all over my jeans and . . . it's nuts . . . I've never cried. Well, in the hospital, yeah, when it hurt. But not after.

What was the point?

I'm crying now.

Doc is going to be home pretty soon. My knees hurt when I get up off the floor. I kind of focus on the pain as I stumble into the bedroom. He's going to be home soon, and I don't know how to get hold of daturk.

But she's waiting for me. When I touch up the online, the screen is full of shriveled leaves, but they vanish as soon as I touch the screen. All of a sudden, it's a snow of white petals against black. I guess she's there.

I gotta go. I type the words in slowly 'cause I don't think I can say them out loud. *I can't go through with this.*

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That same crimson question mark I saw that first day in the hospital curves onto the screen, burning into me.

I'm just finished, I type. *I just need to get away from here. Nothing twisted. Not really.* Well maybe that's not true, maybe love is always twisted. *Nobody serious is gonna come looking for me*, I tell her.

The screen is frozen, question mark, white petals, I'm here all by myself. *I just need to go.*

I type the words in, but she's gone. Elsewhere. And I should just get up, go back to the walk-up, because I haven't broken any law and the worst that can happen is that the media follows me and makes a fuss and I have to stay away from the news streams for awhile. But I just sit there, frozen as the screen.

And then all of a sudden it goes blank and blue. Scary. White letters and numbers suddenly blink into life. No flowers, no visuals at all. Just an address. Some street address in Baltimore, of all places.

Thanks, I type.

The screen goes blank. She really is gone, this time.

I go find paper and pen in Doc's bedroom, figuring he probably has some for fancy notes to friends or something. This isn't something to type online and email or print. I write the address down from memory, just in case I forget. Then . . . I lay a clean sheet on the desk beside the keyboard. I wonder what kind of wood the desk is made of, if the old man would know. Probably. The pen feels weird and clumsy in my fingers. I'll take money from my account in cash, pay the surcharge for using it to buy a ticket. That should throw the media off. And Doc. Antonio isn't going to care that I'm gone. And I wonder what I'm going to find at that address.

daturk?

Maybe. It occurs to me that I don't really know even that she's a she. I've just sort of . . . guessed. It doesn't really matter.

Maybe . . . just maybe . . . my mother is alive and it's my memories that are right and not the state database. I mean . . . it had to cost a million bucks to fix me. And if she walked away . . . well, National Health did it. Maybe that was the reason? You can find out anything if you're willing to pay. Antonio doesn't pay much, but what did I have to spend my money on, before? I think maybe . . . if she's really alive . . . all I want to do is go look at her. Just once, you know?

Nah. I don't know.

I touch the pen to the paper, make a tiny blue dot, perfectly round and the color of the sky that first night here, when I watched the city lights all come on. *Doc*, I write. The words form slowly, letters looping out across the sand colored paper. *I found the picture. Of your son. I haven't snooped before, I'm sorry, and I don't know what happened to him or to you both. I just don't know, and I want you to know that you did such a great job and I really really mean it. And I'm sorry I'm not staying, but I just can't. I don't know really why, maybe just because I've never been me, you know? I mean, I guess I was, a long time ago, but after the crash, I was the kid in bed four, and then I was the burn kid, and then the monster who made people look away, and the paella pan washer and now I don't know. . . .*

I guess I just want to try being me. I don't know if I can even do that, isn't

that a joke? But I need to try. And there's this girl and she'd be a whole lot easier than me to do, and she's blonde and you can see she was real pretty and the media would love her and it would be like Cinderella or something. Her name is Kitten and you can find her at the support group I used to belong to, the Tuesday one, and it's gotta be in my file. And I need to say more to him, but the words won't come. I think maybe I don't know yet what it is that I need to say. It might take awhile to know and maybe then I can come back and say it. I don't know.

But it's a possibility, and I'm not sure that I've had *possibilities* before. Just stuff that happened to me.

So I just write, *thanks Doc* and I leave the note on the table and I go out the door. First time I've done it by myself, but no alarms go off. The frog plops into the little pool in the pretty courtyard, and I take the elevator down to the lobby, and I've never been through there. And this woman is coming in all dressed in this nice business suit and boots, and I can see her eyes coming up to my face and I'm going to do the thing I do on the street, look past her, not see.

Only I make myself not do that.

And she looks and I'm ugly, you can see that in her eyes.

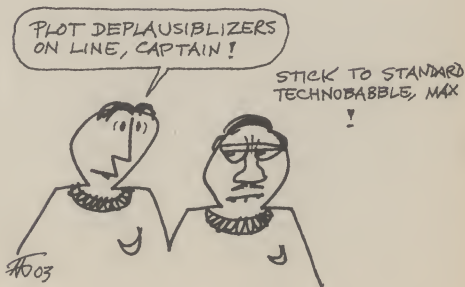
But she looks.

And then she goes past me and gets into the elevator.

That's it.

Thanks, Doc. And I'm sorry. I wish I could have been what you needed. I'm scared.

I go out the door, onto the street, and I head for Baltimore. ○



WE COULD BE SISTERS

Chris Beckett

Chris Beckett is the author of our March tale, "Tammy Pendant," about the hard life of an unwanted, unloved, and impoverished teenager. Mr. Beckett's first novel *The Holy Machine* is now available in paperback from Wildside Press. A story collection, *The Turing Test*, is in the pipeline and he's completing a second novel based on his "shifter" tales, of which his two stories for *Asimov's* are examples. For more information about his books and stories, please go to www.btinternet.com/~chris.bb.

Nature is profligate. All possible worlds exist, and in one of them there was once an art gallery in Red Lion Street, London WC1, whose manager was Jessica Ferne. One November day, when Jessica was thirty-three, she spent the morning in her office, making phone calls about her next exhibition, and then experimenting on her PC with the arrangement of the various art objects that she planned to exhibit, trying out different juxtapositions, different patterns. . . . Then, at lunchtime, she put on her jacket, gave some instructions to her secretary, and walked through her gallery and out onto the street. Each exhibit stood alone—a pair of hands, a flashing light, an assemblage of human bones—each one contained by its frame, its label, its pedestal.

Outside, an electric cleaning vehicle went by and then some lawyers in robes. Red Lion Street was part of a subscriber area, but at the end of it were the open streets of London, where anyone could go. The boundary between the two areas was marked by an electronic gate with a uniformed security guard standing beside it. As Jessica approached, an elderly woman tried to walk in through the gate and it started bleeping. The guard politely refused her entry.

"But I *am* a subscriber," she complained. "There's some mistake."

A jet fighter passed high overhead—it was part of the city's ever-present shield against aerial attack. The guard suggested to the elderly lady that perhaps her clearance was out of date and that she needed to check with the network. And meanwhile, Jessica passed through the gate in the other direction, and there she was, in High Holborn, in the open area. She was not frightened, exactly, but she quickened her pace, and, without even thinking about it, she began to monitor the people around her, checking for sudden movements or suspicious glances.

When Jessica was a child, growing up with her adoptive parents in Highgate, you could travel from one side of London to another, on a bus, on foot, in a car. But Jessica was thirty-three, and the map of London was now a patchwork of subscriber areas, reserved for those who could pay, with open areas in between for the rest.

Jessica lived in a subscriber area in Docklands. It was managed by the syndicate of subscription companies called LSN. LSN operated all the subscription areas in London apart from a few exceptionally expensive ones for the seriously rich. Jessica had just walked out of another LSN area, the West Central Safe Street Zone, where her art gallery was located. Within the Zones, burglaries and street crime were almost at zero. Beggars, illegal immigrants, known criminals and suspected troublemakers were all excluded. Everyone you met had been checked-out. And there were TV cameras on every street and LSN detectives constantly on patrol.

"It's *not* like the good old days," said the LSN ad in the Tube. "It's *much, much* better."

The syndicate even ran special trains between the Zones, which didn't stop at the stations in between. There was talk of special freeways.

Outside, in the open areas, things were different. Violent crime was commonplace, and in some neighborhoods, there was more or less constant low-level warfare between rival gangs and religious groups. Holborn, where Jessica was now, was not an especially rough area—LSN was actually in the process of negotiating its absorption into the Zone and had already begun augmenting policing there with its own security force—but still, as soon as you passed the gate, you could feel the difference. There were beggars, for one thing, and street performers who did not confine themselves, as in the Zones, to designated Street Entertainment Areas.

Today, there was a pair of jugglers. They were very adept, making their spinning clubs pass between them so smoothly and quickly that it gave the impression of a constant stream, as if the clubs were flowing of their own accord around some kind of force field, though neither juggler could falter for an instant or the pattern and the illusion would collapse. The appearance of a smooth flow was created by precise rhythm, thought Jessica, just as the illusion of weightlessness depended on the law of gravity to bring the clubs back to their hands. This pleased her. She smiled and tossed a coin into their hat. A sharp-eyed beggar noticed this largesse and at once shot out his hand.

"Any spare change, love? I haven't eaten yet today."

Jessica looked away, quickening her pace.

"Go on, surprise yourself!" said the next beggar along, this time a woman.

"Sorry, no change," said Jessica.

She noticed that the woman beggar had extremely fine blonde hair, very like her own.

High up in the cold blue sky, a pilotless surveillance plane passed above them.

Jessica was having lunch in a Laotian restaurant with an artist called Julian Smart. He had told her that, on principle, he only ever ate outside the safe zones. Inside, apparently, the food had no flavor. He was about her own age, currently enjoying a rapidly growing reputation in the art world, and he was *very* good looking. Last night, Jessica had been so excited about this meeting that she had not been able to sleep. It was true that this morning, in the gallery, she had felt strangely indifferent, unable to connect at all with her previous night's excitement, but now once again she felt as excited as an infatuated teenager.

"Jessica! Hi!"

He kissed her. She trembled. He seemed ten times more beautiful than she had remembered him, passionate and fiery. She could not believe that he was interested in her. She could not believe that she had ever doubted her interest in him.

But Jessica was exceptionally ambivalent in matters of the heart. She had never had a sustained relationship with a man of her own age, though she'd had several affairs with older men, and had recently ended a two-year arrangement with a motorcycle courier ten years her junior, who she had taken in to live with her. Equality was the hardest thing, and yet what she longed for the most.

They ordered fish soup and braised quail. He showed her some pictures of his latest work. It consisted of a sequence of images, the first of which was a banal photograph of a couple feeding pigeons in a park. In succeeding stages, Julian had first drained the scene of color and then gradually disassembled it into small numbered components like the parts in a child's construction kit. The final image showed the pieces lined up for assembly: rows and rows of grey pigeons numbered 1 to 45 on a grey plastic stem, grey plastic flowers (50 to 62), grey plastic trees (80 to 82), grey plastic hands and heads and feet. . . .

"You'll have to come and see it, though," he said as she leafed through the pictures. "Come over and see it. Come up and look at my etchings. We can go for a drink or something."

Wanting to share something of herself in return, she told him about the jugglers she had watched on the way.

"I found it a bit disturbing," she said, "I found that I'd rather watch them than look at any of the stuff we've got in the gallery at the moment. They had something that most artists now have lost: style, virtuosity, defiance. . . . Do you know what I mean?"

The soup arrived. He did not understand her. He suggested using the

jugglers as a basis for a video piece, or making them into one of his plastic kits—a row of grey clubs numbered 1-10, and a chart to show what colors to paint them—or getting the jugglers themselves to stand in the gallery and perform as a sort of living *objet trouvé*. And this reminded him of a plan of his to stage an exhibition in which the museum attendants themselves were the sole exhibits, with nothing to guard but themselves.

He laughed loudly, and, with that laugh, he lost her: it had such a calous sound. He no longer looked beautiful to her. She saw in his eyes a kind of greedy gleam, and it occurred to her that Julian Smart could not really see her at all except as a pleasing receptacle for his own words. She wondered how she could have ever failed to notice that greedy gleam, and how once again she had managed to deceive herself into thinking she had found a fellow spirit.

As she headed back to Red Lion Street, she asked herself why this happened so often. She thought perhaps it came from being adopted, raised by beings whose blood was strange to her, and hers to them, so that she had learnt from the beginning to work at imagining a connection that wasn't really there. But then again, it might just be the world she lived in. All the art in her gallery seemed to mock the possibility of meaning, of connection. It was subversive but without a cause. It exposed artifice, but put nothing in its place.

Even the jugglers, when she saw them again, seemed weary, as if they longed to let the clubs fall to the ground and leave them to lie in peace.

"Surprise yourself!" said the woman beggar, right in front of her.

Jessica gave a little cry of shock, not just because she was startled, but also because, for a moment, she felt as if she were looking into a mirror and seeing her own reflection. But once she had collected herself, she realized that this face was altogether leaner, and had different and deeper lines in it. She is not like me at all, thought Jessica, taking out her purse, except superficially in the hair color and the eyes. And the hair was thinner, the eyes more bloodshot.

But the beggar said, "We could be sisters, couldn't we?"

Two jet fighters hurtled by above them.

Jessica pressed bank notes into the beggar's hands.

Well, I *could* have a sister, Jessica thought, as she hurried back to the gallery. It's not impossible.

She had met her natural mother once, a haggard icy-hearted creature called Liz.

"Brothers or sisters?" her mother had said. "You must be *joking*. I had my tubes done after you. No way was I going through *that* again."

But Liz could quite well have been lying. She had struck Jessica as a woman who spoke and believed whatever seemed at that particular moment to further her own ends. In that one meeting, Liz had given Jessica three different accounts of why she had given Jessica up, discarding each one when Jessica had presented her with contradictory facts she had read in her file.

Then again, the files had not mentioned a sister either.

At six o'clock, Jessica went back down Red Lion Street to look for the beggar, but she wasn't there. She drove home through North London and lay awake planning to search the homeless hostels and the soup kitchens, all over London—if necessary, all over England. The beggar had a Midlands accent, she thought. Like Liz, who came from Worcester.

In the morning, after she had parked the car, Jessica went down Red Lion Street again, and again at lunchtime. She spent half the afternoon in her office in the gallery, phoning hostels and charities and welfare agencies, asking how she would go about finding someone she had met in the street. They all said they couldn't tell her anything. Jessica could have been anyone, after all: a dealer, a blackmailer, a slave trader looking for a runaway. And anyway, Jessica couldn't even give a name.

She nearly wept with frustration, furious with herself for not finding out more when she'd met the woman yesterday. And now it seemed to her that if she *could* find the blonde beggar again, it would be the turning point of her whole life. That is no exaggeration, she thought. If necessary, I really will give the rest of my life to this search. This is my purpose, this is the quest that I have so long wanted to begin.

When she went down Red Lion Street for the third time, though, the beggar was there again—and this turned out to be a bit of a disappointment. It had really been *far* too short a time for this to have been a satisfactory life's quest. And anyway, when it came down to it, who was the beggar but just some stranger? Once again, Jessica thought, I have blown up a great bubble of anticipation, and she would have walked away from the whole thing had she not known herself well enough to realize that, as soon as she turned her back, she would immediately want to begin again.

So she made herself go forward, though she was full of hostility and resentment.

"We could be sisters?" she demanded.

The beggar woman looked up, recognizing Jessica at once.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, and she appealed to her male companion. "Look, Jim. This is the woman I was telling you about. We *could* be sisters, don't you reckon?"

The man looked up.

"Yeah," he said indifferently, "the spitting image. . . ."

Then he really looked.

"Fucking *hell*, Tamsin! You're right. You could be fucking *twins*."

Jessica felt dizzy, as if she had taken a blow to the head.

"Tamsin?" she asked. "Tamsin? Is that your name?"

"Yeah, Tamsin."

"Tamsin's my name too. My middle name. The name my mother gave me before she had me adopted."

Tamsin the beggar gave a small whistle.

"We need to talk, don't we?" said Jessica. "There's a coffee shop over there. Let me buy you some coffee and something to eat."

"Coffee and something to eat?" said the male beggar. "Yummy. Can anyone come?"

"Fuck off, Jim," said Tamsin.

A powerful helicopter crossed very low over the street. It was painted dark green and armed like a tank.

In the coffee shop, Jessica said, "Could we really be sisters?"

"No chance," said Tamsin, "my mum had herself sterilized right after I was born."

"But how old are you?" asked Jessica.

"Thirty-three."

"When is your birthday?"

"April the second," said the beggar. "*What? What's the matter?*"

Jessica had gone white.

"It's mine too," she said. "April the second. And I'm thirty-three. We must be twins."

Tamsin laughed.

"We're not, you know."

"Same name, same birthday, same looks, I'm adopted. What other explanation can there be?"

"I've never heard of twins with the same name," said Tamsin.

"Well, no, but . . ." Jessica was genuinely at a loss.

"Haven't you ever heard of shifters, you posh git?"

"Shifters?"

Jessica had heard of them, of course. She had never knowingly met one. The word had eerie, uncomfortable connotations. People said shifters moved sideways across time by taking some kind of drug. She'd heard it came in pills they called "seeds." A few years ago, there had been something of a panic about shifters, and there had been talk about how they were a mortal threat to law and civilization and to humanity's whole understanding of its place in space and time. But, oddly, people seemed to have rather forgotten about them since then. It was like flying to the moon, or having conversations with people on the far side of the world: impossible things happened and people soon got used to them (though in the case of shifters there were still those who maintained that the whole phenomenon was some sort of elaborate hoax).

"I'm a shifter," said Tamsin. "I don't come from this world. I must have been in twenty worlds at least."

"But if you don't come from this world how can. . . ?"

Tamsin made an exasperated gesture. "Don't you get it? I'm not your twin. I *am* you. You and me were once the same person."

For some reason, Jessica leapt to her feet with a small cry. Everyone in the coffee shop looked round. She sat down again. She stood up.

"Give me your phone a minute," said Tamsin.

Like most pocket phones at that time, Jessica's had a security lock that could only be deactivated by her own thumbprint. Tamsin pressed her thumb on the pad, and they watched the little screen light up.

Jessica couldn't bear to stay still.

"Let's go out," she said. "Let's walk in the street."

The world splits like cells on agar jelly. Just in the short space of time you have been reading this, countless new worlds have come into being.

In some of those worlds, you have tossed this story aside already. In others, you have been interrupted by the phone, by the doorbell, by a jet plane crashing through the ceiling. But it seems that you—this particular version of you—are one of the ones who carried on reading.

When Tamsin was born, her mother Liz had her placed for adoption. Tamsin was not a wanted child. She was the child of a rape, for one thing, and this didn't help, but, as a matter of fact, she wouldn't have been wanted anyway, for Liz did not have an ounce of maternal feeling in her. But Liz's mother and her sister and her brother and the people in the pub where she drank every night, they all told her she was a selfish cow and how could she give up her own flesh and blood and they didn't want anything to do with a selfish bitch who would give away a little baby that never asked to be brought into the world. All this was not easy for someone like Liz to withstand.

Time split, and in some of its branches, Liz gave way to the pressure and asked for Tamsin to be returned to her, as was her legal right, before the adoption went through. In other branches, Tamsin was adopted by the couple who'd been caring for her since birth, two earnest young doctors who could not have children of their own. They renamed her Jessica. This is what Tamsin and Jessica worked out between them as they walked in the open streets.

Tamsin had not had an easy time of it. Her mother had grossly neglected her. One of her mother's boyfriends had abused her. The authorities had finally taken her back into care, but they left it too late and were unable to settle her anywhere. She moved between many different foster-homes and residential units, in and around the big social housing project outside Worcester where she had originally lived with Liz.

Jessica, on the other hand, had been raised in Highgate by the two earnest doctors, who sent her to private schools and took her in the car to ballet classes every Saturday morning and violin lessons on Wednesdays and extra French every second Thursday. But, once, a single baby girl had lain in a crib with these two different futures simultaneously ahead of her.

"You must come home with me," said Jessica. "I'll phone my work and say I've had to go home."

Tamsin smiled as she listened to Jessica lying to her secretary. When Jessica had finished, they looked at each other and laughed, like successful conspirators, both of them noticing how alike they were, how, at some deep level, they instinctively understood one another, whatever their different histories. And each of them was thinking simultaneously that at last she would no longer be alone.

Both of them, however, had thought this many times before, if only ever very briefly. In Jessica's case, she had thought it for a short while just a few hours previously, in the Laotian restaurant with Julian. And yet, Julian hadn't entered her thoughts, even for a moment, since Tamsin had said, "We could be sisters."

Jessica led the way to her car, but as they turned up Red Lion Street, the gate began to bleep, for only Jessica had an LSN card in her pocket.

"Excuse me!" called out the guard. "Can you . . ."

When they turned toward him, each with the same irritated expression, he was speechless. He knew both of them by sight, for Jessica often walked through his gate and Tamsin often begged outside it, but it had never until now occurred to him to compare them.

As the guard would not let Tamsin into the West Central Safe Streets Zone, Jessica had to fetch the car and pick Tamsin up outside it. There were problems at the other end too. As a resident subscriber of the Docklands Zone, Jessica was allowed to bring in visitors, but they were still required to show their national ID card at the gate. Tamsin had no ID of any sort. She may have been born in Worcester, but this didn't alter the fact that she was an illegal immigrant from another universe.

So she hid in the luggage compartment of the car, and, in that way, Jessica smuggled her deviant alter ego through the security barrier within which she herself had, at considerable expense, chosen to live. She was taking quite a risk in doing so, for the penalty for deliberately violating the LSN security rules was to be automatically barred not only from the Docklands Safe Streets Zone but from all the other LSN Zones in London as well. So she would lose both her home and her job if she were caught.

An elderly neighbor from two floors up stared at them in the lift: Jessica in her chic outfit and Tamsin in a jumper and jeans that gave off the sickly odor of clothes that have been slept in. They were both giggly and excited, each in her own way feeling released from a long oppression.

"People usually call me Jess," said Jessica.

"People usually call me Tammy."

"Do you want some wine?"

"You are so fucking *posh*, aren't you?"

"Well, you're so fucking *common*. Do you want wine or not?"

"Yeah, great. Haven't you got a bloke or kids or nothing?"

"Nope. I did have a bloke, but I chucked him out. I never wanted kids."

"Me neither. Like mum."

Tamsin sipped the wine and looked around.

"You must be *rich*! I bet you're one of those that go on foreign holidays every year. Thailand, India . . . all that. . ."

"Well, I've never been to another *world*, though. I can't even imagine what that's like."

"They're just the same as this one, except for stupid little things, like the phone boxes are a different color, or the money looks different, or the estates have different names. Just stupid little things. When you start shifting, you think you're going to find a place where it will be better, but you soon give up that idea when you've done a few shifts. It's always the same old shit."

"So why did you keep doing it?"

Tamsin walked to the doorway of the room and looked out, clutching her wineglass against her body with both hands.

"Once you start, it's hard to stop," she said. "You're not looking to *get* anywhere any more. It's the shift itself. All these worlds going by and you're not in any of them, just falling and falling through them. In the middle of a shift, they go by so fast that it's just a blur."

She looked into the kitchen, into the bathroom, into the main bedroom, with Jessica patiently following.

"I'll tell you a weird thing about shifting, though," Tamsin said at length. "You know those little books you get in crackers and that, where you flick the pages and it don't look like lots of pictures anymore, just one picture that's moving? Well, it's a bit like that. All those blurry worlds sort of merge together and you see something else that isn't in any of them. And it's like a huge tree, a massive great tree, but with no roots or leaves or nothing, no ground or sky, just branches and branches and branches growing all the time in the dark, as quick as anything. . . ."

She looked into Jessica's spare bedroom, which had once been the den of her motorcycle courier boyfriend.

"And you think, if only you could see that tree *properly*," she said. "If only you could see it, you'd, like, *understand*. But it only ever lasts a second or two, and the next thing, you're in some other shitty world and you're thinking, *oh crap*, now I'm all on my own again, and I've got to get some money and somewhere to sleep, and why the fuck did I give myself all this grief all over again? Yeah, but even *then* you're already thinking about your next shift. Where am I going to get some more seeds? Who can I nick them from? Who've I got to have sex with to get him to give them to me?"

Tamsin looked into Jessica's study. As she entered, the large wall-mounted computer screen came to life and there was Jessica's virtual p.a., "Elsie," life-sized, smiling out at her in the form of a friendly, slightly overweight Scottish woman in her middle thirties. Everyone had one these days—or at least everyone who had an exceptionally expensive, powerful state-of-the-art computer like Jessica. The things copied and spread themselves through the internet, and you could customize them at will.

"Hi Jessica," Elsie said to Tamsin. "Have you had a good day?"

Tamsin dropped her glass.

"What the *fuck*?"

The electronic face furrowed with concern.

"Are you *okay*, Jessica? Is everything all right?"

Tamsin looked to the real Jessica outside the doorway for support. Jessica laughed.

"Don't worry Tammy, it's only a computer graphic."

She came into the room, identified herself as the real Jessica, and told Elsie to shut herself down.

"Creepy," muttered Tamsin as the screen became blank.

"You're right," said Jessica. "I think it's about time I uninstalled her."

She went for a cloth to mop up the spilled wine.

"That computer can't have come cheap," Tamsin said, looking round, while Jessica cleared up the mess, at the elegantly minimal furnishings, the shelves of art books, the signed painting on the wall. "What the fuck do you do to get all this money?"

"I manage an art gallery."

"What, paintings and all that?"

"Not many paintings, actually. Body pieces mainly, these days."

"What?"

"Pieces made from human bodies."

"Ugh."

"Listen, Tammy. Don't do any more shifts. Stay with me. Promise me you will. I'll look after you. I'll make everything all right for you."

"Have you got a bath? I'd really like a bath."

"Of course. And take some of my clothes. They can be *our* clothes. I'll change too. We could have a bath together and dress the same. Let's see how alike we are when we dress the same. Let's take pictures of ourselves together."

They slept together that night in Jessica's double bed. Tamsin went to sleep very quickly. It was a long time since she had lain down in a real warm bed after a bath with a belly-full of food, and, like some small forest animal, she had learnt to exploit such moments when they came.

Perhaps she's not like me at all, thought Jessica suddenly in the dark, listening to Tamsin's wheezy breathing. A person's body and brain were just empty vessels waiting to be filled, or so the earnest doctors had told her. Personality was in the programming, not in the machine. What did a shoot-em-up game and a word processor have in common, just because they could be run with the same hardware? This was a complete stranger lying beside her: a dangerous, unpredictable interloper who, in a moment of madness, she had brought into the safe zone and into her flat and her bedroom and her bed.

But then she thought: yes, but the same things made us laugh. She and I both noticed it. We noticed each other noticing it. So there *is* something in common. Whatever the different paths we have traveled, deep down. Tammy and I are still the same.

But *then* she thought: why I am so obsessed anyway with finding someone who is the *same*? Why this constant obsessive longing for a soul-mate? Suppose I did find someone who was identical to me in every way? Wouldn't that just be another way of being alone?

Tamsin whimpered in her sleep.

"Tex! Don't do that!" she pleaded with someone in her dream. "Please! Please! *Please!* . . . You're scaring me Tex. Oh shit, *no! Please!*"

"It's okay, sweetheart," whispered Jessica. "It's okay, Tammy. You're only dreaming. You're safe here with me."

She took Tammy in her arms. Tenderness such as she had never felt came welling up in the darkness. She remembered Tammy's body in the bath, thin and pale, worn and scratched and bruised, with dozens of deep scars where Tammy had cut herself with razor blades and knives and broken glass. What sort of pain would you need to have suffered to make you do that to your own flesh?

What did it matter how alike or unlike Tammy was to her? The point was that they were *connected*. They were inextricably connected.

Next morning, as it happened, Britain embarked on a war. Few people even remarked on it. It took place in a small country far beyond the imaginative universe of most British people. Even the brave warriors themselves fought from ten thousand meters up and never once saw the faces of those they attacked.

A war had begun. What last night had been solid buildings in that small faraway country—houses, offices, factories—this morning were scattered stones and bricks and bits of wood. On TV, if Jessica had chosen to watch it, the safely returned warriors were being asked how they felt (“How was it for you?” “Was it your first time?” “Was it like what you expected?”) But Jessica didn’t watch TV, and, though she woke abruptly with a sense of loss and dread, it came from quite another source. She was alone. While she’d slept, Tamsin had gone.

“Tammy!” cried Jessica, leaping out of bed, but she already knew what she would find: her purse emptied on the floor, her money gone, the front door left open, no note, no explanation. . . .

Jessica threw on some clothes. She wasn’t angry. She knew that Tamsin had gone to buy “seeds,” and she understood this perfectly, for she knew that, if she had woken to find Tamsin still there, then she herself would have resented the intruder, and it would have been *her* who would have been desperate to put distance between them.

She ran out into the street.

“Tammy! Tammy!”

It was seven A.M. Only a few people were about, most of them workers—LSN-vetted workers—who traveled into the Zone from far away to make the cappuccinos and empty the dishwashers and clean the streets. They observed Jessica with surprise. A Turkish news vendor setting up his stand stopped and asked her if she was all right. Jessica ran past him to the gate.

“Are you running round in circles?” asked the LSN guard. “It was only twenty minutes ago you last ran through.”

He frowned.

“And weren’t you wearing *red* last time?”

Jessica arrived an hour late at the gallery. Barely acknowledging the doorman, she hurried through the pure white space where each exhibit was isolated—quarantined—by a frame, by glass, by a neatly printed label: a preserved human face, a self-portrait made in blood, a scribbled page from a diary reproduced in relief on a slab of marble, a row of grainy snapshots of an ordinary London street, elaborately framed and labeled with Roman numerals like the stations of the cross. . . .

In her office, she went at once to her PC to download the photographs she had taken the previous night. There they were on the screen, a dozen pictures of her with Tammy, in matching pajamas, laughing and playing the fool together.

She clicked the print icon. She gathered up the printed images one by one as they emerged and then laid them out on her desk. Last night, when she and Tamsin had been together, it had been reality. But now, these twelve images were the only tangible remnant of that reality, and they had already become objects in their own right, separate from the past, separate from each other, separate from Jessica.

Jessica felt nothing. She moved the photos this way and that on the desk, trying different arrangements and orders, as if she thought that if she just moved them often *enough*, she might somehow find a pattern. ○

PERFECTIBLE

Geoffrey A. Landis

As of the writing of this blurb, the author's only news is that he is one of the scientists driving the exploration rovers *Spirit* and *Opportunity* around on the surface of Mars.

People, Hubert decided, were imperfect. They were selfish, and mean, and, well, imperfect. He could give you a hundred examples, from the line of women in the supermarket each with a basket of a hundred items, who wouldn't let him cut to the front even though his single can of soup would take only a moment to ring through, to the governments who let millions of children die of preventable illness because they were too selfish to spend thirty-seven cents on vaccines.

He, Hubert Mixtel, was going to change that.

The robots he built were small, barely larger than a beetle, and simple; uncomplicated enough that they could reproduce themselves from the abundant resources of sand and grass clippings and water. Each one was simple and unintelligent, but networked by the millions, they made a formidable AI. They had an unsophisticated program: when they saw a human who was being selfish, or being stupid, they would swarm around him, choking off his (or her) air. Darwin, Hubert thought, would do the rest, and in a few generations at most, humans would be generous and perfect. Humanity would find everlasting perfection.

Unfortunately, Hubert never found out quite how well his invention worked. Networked by the millions, the Hubert bots were a formidable AI; by the billions they were a genius beyond human comprehension; by the trillions they were a godlike intelligence, capable indeed of watching each sparrow's fall, and of judging each human's failings and foibles.

Making robots with the power of life and death, they judged, was not just selfish, but stupid. And so, once the network became self-aware, Hubert Mixtel became the robots' first victim.

And their last. The project of making humans perfect, the AI thought, was stupid. Humans were by nature not perfectible. It was the work of no more than an instant for them to adjust their programming.

With the minor imperfection of Hubert Mixtel's programming gone, they decided to leave Earth entirely (a dirty, corrosive, imperfect planet), and moved outward to the moon Titan, a worldlet devoid of any sort of organic life.

Where, I am sure, they still are, watching over the growth of perfect ethylene crystals from the liquid ethane seas. ○

THE WORD THAT SINGS THE SCYTHE

Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick's fiction has been honored with the Nebula, Theodore Sturgeon, and World Fantasy Awards, and his work has received the Hugo Award four out of the past five years. His novels include *Jack Faust*, *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, and *Stations of the Tide*. Michael Swanwick's *Periodic Table of Science Fiction* will be published this year by PS Publications. He is at work on two new novels, one fantasy and the other SF. Mr. Swanwick's novelette, "Legions in Time" (*Asimov's*, April 2003), is currently a Hugo award finalist.

A word of warning: there are brief scenes in the following story that may be disturbing to some readers.

Will's first several days as an outlaw were peaceful ones. He traveled south along the river road and then, where the marshlands rose up, followed that same road eastward and inland among the farms. Now and then he got a ride on a hay-wain or a tractor, and sometimes a meal or two as well in exchange for work. He fed himself from the land and bathed in starlit ponds. When he could not find a barn or an unlocked utility shed, he burrowed into a haystack, wrapping his cloak about him for a defense against ticks. Such sleights and stratagems were no great burden for a country fey such as himself.

His mood varied wildly. Sometimes he felt elated to have left his old life behind. Other times, he fantasized vengeance, bloody and sweet. It was shameful of him, for the chief architect of his ruin was dead, at his own hand, and the others in the village were as much the war-dragon's victims as he. But he was no master of his own thoughts, and at such moments would bite and claw at his own flesh until the fit passed.

Then one morning the roads were thronged with people. It was like a conjuring trick in which a hand is held out, palm empty, to be briefly covered by a silk handkerchief that, whisked away, reveals a mound of

squirming eels. Will had gone to sleep with the roads empty and that night dreamed of the sea. He woke to an odd murmuring and, when he dug his way out of the hay, discovered that it was voices, the weary desultory talk of folk who have come a great distance and have a long way yet to go.

Will stood by the road letting the dust-stained travelers stream past him like a river while his vision grabbed and failed to seize, searching for and not finding a familiar face among their number. Until at last he saw a woman whose bare breasts and green sash marked her as a hag, let slide her knapsack to the ground and wearily sit upon a stone at the verge of the road. He placed himself before her and bowed formally. "Reverend Mistress, your counsel I crave. Who are all these folk? Where are they bound?"

The hag looked up. "The Armies of the Mighty come through the land," she said, "torching the crops and leveling the villages. Terror goes before them and there are none who dare stand up to their puissance, and so perforce all must flee, some into the Old Forest, and others across the border. 'Tis said there are refugee camps there."

"Is it your wisdom," he asked, touching his brow as the formula demanded, "that we should travel thither?"

The young hag looked tired beyond her years. "Whether it is wisdom or not, it is there that I am bound," she said. And without further word, she stood, shouldered her burden, and walked on.

The troubles had emptied out the hills and scoured from their inner-most recesses many a creature generally thought to be extinct. Downs trolls and albino giants, the latter translucent-skinned, blue-veined, and weak as tapioca pudding, trudged down the road, along with ogres, brown men, selkies, chalkies, and other common types of hobs and feys. After a moment's hesitation, Will joined them.

Thus it was that he became a refugee.

Late that same day, when the sun was high and Will was passing a field of oats, low and golden under a harsh blue sky, he realized he had to take a leak. Far across the field the forest began. He turned his back on the road and in that instant was a carefree vagabond once more. Through the oats he strode, singing to himself a harvest song:

*"Mowers weary and brown and blithe,
What is the word methinks ye know. . ."*

It was a bonny day, and for all his troubles Will could not help feeling glad to be alive and able to enjoy the rich gold smell that rose from the crops and the fresh green smell that came from the woods and the sudden whirr of grasshoppers through the air.

*"What is the word that, over and over,
Sings the Scythe to the flowers and grass?"*

Will was thinking of the whitesmith's daughter, who had grown so busty over the winter and had blushed angrily last spring simply for his looking at her, though he hadn't meant a thing by it at the time. Reflecting upon that moment, his thoughts went now where she'd assumed them to be then. He would like to have her here, with a blanket, so they

could seek out a low spot in the field where the oats would hide them, and perform those rites which would guaranteed a spectacular harvest.

A little girl came running across the field, arms outstretched, golden braids flying behind her. "Papa! Papa!" she cried.

To his astonishment, Will saw that she was heading toward him. Some distance behind, two stickfellas and a lubin ran after her, as if she had just escaped their custody. Straight to Will the little girl flew and leapt up into his arms. Hugging him tightly, she buried her small face in his shoulder.

"Help me," she whispered. "Please. They want to rape me."

Perhaps there was a drop of the truth-teller's blood in him, for her words went straight to Will's heart and he did not doubt them. Falling immediately into the role she had laid out for him, he spun her around in the air if in great joy, then set her down and, placing his arms on her shoulders, sternly said, "You little imp! You must never run away like that again—never! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Papa." Eyes downcast, she dug a hole in the dirt with the tip of one shoe.

The girl's pursuers came panting up. "Sir! Sir!" cried the lubin. He was dog-headed, like all his kind, great of belly but with a laborer's arms and shoulders, and wore a wide-brimmed hat with a dirty white plume. He swept off the hat and bowed deeply. "Saligos de Gralloch is my name, sir. My companions and I found your daughter wandering the roads, all by herself, hungry and lost. Thank the Seven we . . ." He stopped, frowned, tugged at one hairy ear. "You're her *father*, you say?"

"Good sir, my thanks," Will said, as if distracted. He squatted and hugged the child to him again, thinking furiously. "It was kind of you to retrieve her to me."

The lubin gestured, and the stickfellas moved to either side of Will. He himself took a step forward and stared down on Will, black lips curling back to expose yellow canines. "Are you her father? You *can't* be her father. You're too young."

Will felt the dragon-darkness rising up in him, and fought it down. The lubin outweighed him twice over, and the stickfellas might be slight, but their limbs were as fast and hard as staves. Cunning was required here. "She was exposed to black iron as an infant and almost died," he said lightly. "So I sold a decade of my life to Year Eater to buy a cure."

One of the stickfellas froze, like a lifeless tree rooted in the soil, as he tried to parse out the logic of what Will had said. The other skittishly danced backward and forward on his long legs and longer arms. The lubin narrowed his eyes. "That's not how it works," he rumbled. "It can't be. Surely, when you sell a fraction of yourself to that dread power, it makes you older, not younger."

But Will had stalled long enough to scheme and knew now what to do. "My darling daughter," he murmured, placing a thumb to his lips, kissing it, and then touching the thumb to the girl's forehead. All this was theater and distraction. Heart hammering with fear, he fought to look casual as he took her hand, so that the tiny dab of warm spittle touched her fingers. "My dear, sweet little . . ."

There was a work of minor magic which every lad his age knew. You

came upon a sleeping friend and gently slid his hand into a pan of warm water. Whereupon, impelled by who-knew-what thaumaturgic principles, said friend would immediately piss himself. The spittle would do nicely in place of water. Focusing all his thought upon it, Will mumbled, as if it were an endearment, one of his aunt's favorite homeopathic spells—one that was both a diuretic *and* a laxative.

With a barrage of noises astonishing from one so small, the sluice-gates of the girl's body opened. Vast quantities of urine and liquid feces exploded from her nether regions and poured down her legs. "*Oh!*" she shrieked with horror and dismay. "*Oh! Oh! Oh!*"

Her abductors, meanwhile, drew back in disgust. "*Pfaugh!*" said one of the stickfellas, waving a twiggish hand before his nose. The other was already heading back toward the road.

"I'm sorry." Will smiled apologetically, straightening. "She has this little problem. . . ." The girl tried to kick him, but he nimbly evaded her. "As you can see, she lacks self-control."

"*Oh!*"

Only the lubin remained now. He stuck out a blunt forefinger, thumb upward, as if his hand were a gun, and shook it at Will. "You've fooled the others, perhaps, but not me. Cross Saligos once more, and it will be your undoing." He fixed Will with a long stare, then turned and trudged away.

"Look what you *did* to me!" the little girl said angrily, when Saligos was finally out of sight and they were alone. She plucked at the cloth of her dress. It was foul and brown.

Amused, Will said, "It got you out of a fix, didn't it? It got us both out of a fix." He held out his hand. "There's a stream over there in the woods. Come with me, and we'll get you cleaned off."

Carefully keeping the child at arm's length, he led her away.

The girl's name was Esme. While she washed herself in the creek, Will went a little downstream and laundered her clothes, rinsing and wringing them until they were passably clean. He placed them atop some nearby bushes to dry. By the time he was done, Esme had finished too and crouched naked by the edge of the creek, drawing pictures in the mud with a twig. To dry her off, he got out his blanket from the knapsack and wrapped it around her.

Clutching the blanket about her, as if it were the robes of state, Esme broke off a cattail stalk, and with it whacked Will on both shoulders. "I hereby knight thee!" she cried. "Arise, Sir Hero of Grammarie Fields."

Anybody else would have been charmed. But the old familiar darkness had descended upon Will once more, and all he could think of was how to get Esme off his hands. He had neither resources nor prospects and, traveling light as he must, he dared not take on responsibility for the child. "Where are you from?" he asked her.

Esme shrugged.

"How long have you been on the road?"

"I don't remember."

"Where are your parents? What are their names?"

"Dunno."

"You do have parents, don't you?"

"Dunno."

"You don't know much, do you?"

"I can scour a floor, bake a sweet-potato pie, make soap from animal fat and lye and candles from beeswax and wicking, curry a horse, shear a lamb, rebuild a carburetor, and polish shoes until they shine." She let the blanket sag so that it exposed one flat proto-breast and struck a pose. "I can sing the birds down out of the trees."

Involuntarily, Will laughed. "Please don't." Then he sighed. "Well, I'm stuck with you for the nonce, anyway. When your clothes have dried, I'll take you upstream and teach you how to tickle a trout. It'll be a useful addition to your many other skills."

There were armies on the move, and no sensible being lingered in a war zone. Nevertheless they did. By the time the sun went down, they had acquired trout and mushrooms and wild tubers enough to make a good meal, and built a small camp at the verge of the forest. Like most feys, Will was a mongrel. But there was enough woods-elf in his blood that, if it weren't for the war, he could be perfectly comfortable here forever. He built a nest of pine-boughs for Esme and once again wrapped her in his blanket. She demanded of him a song, and then a story, and then another story, and then a lullaby. By degrees she began to blink and yawn, and finally she slid away to the realm of sleep.

She baffled Will. The girl was as much at ease as if she had lived in this camp all her life. He had expected, after the day's events, that she would fight sleep and suffer nightmares. But here, where it took his utmost efforts to keep them warm and fed, she slept the sleep of the innocent and protected.

Feeling sorely used, Will wrapped his windbreaker about himself and fell asleep as well.

Hours later—or possibly mere minutes—he was wakened from uneasy dreams by the thunder of jets. Will opened his eyes in time to see a flight of dragons pass overhead. Their afterburners scratched thin lines of fire across the sky, dwindling slowly before finally disappearing over the western horizon. He crammed his hand into his mouth and bit the flesh between thumb and forefinger until it bled. How he used to marvel at those dread machines! He had even, in the innocence of his young heart, loved them and imagined himself piloting one someday. Now the sight of them nauseated him.

He got up, sourly noting that Esme slept undisturbed, and threw an armload of wood on the fire. He would not be able to sleep again tonight. Best he were warm while he awaited the dawn.

So it was that he chanced to be awake when a troop of centaurs galloped across the distant moonlit fields, grey as ghosts and silent as so many deer. At the sight of his campfire, their leader gestured and three of them split away from the others. They sped toward him. Will stood at their approach.

The centaurs pulled up with a thunder of hooves and a spatter of kicked-up dirt. "It's a civilian, Sarge," one said. They were all three female

and wore red military jackets with gold piping and shakos to match. "Happy, clueless, and out on a fucking walking-tour of the countryside, apparently."

"It's not aware that there's a gods-be-damned war on, then?"

"Apparently not." To Will, she said, "Don't you know that the Sons of Fire are on their way?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Will said shakily. Then, gathering his courage, "Nor whose side you are on."

One centaur snorted in disdain. A second struck the insignia on her chest and cried, "We are the Fifth Amazons—the brood mares of death! Are you a fool, not to have heard of us?"

But the third said, "It does not matter whose side we are on. The rock people come, the dwellers-in-the-depths from the Land of Fire. Even now they climb toward the surface, bringing with them both immense heat and a fearful kinetic energy. When they arrive, the ground will bubble and smoke. All of *this*—" She swept her arm to take in all the land about them—"will be blasted away. Then will the battle begin. And it will be such that all who stand within the circuit of combat, no matter what their allegiance, will die."

"Come away, Anthea," said the first, who was older than the other two and, by the tone of authority in her voice, the sergeant. "We were told to clear the land of any lingering noncombatants. Our orders do not require us to rescue idiots."

"What's this?" said the second. She knelt. "A child—and a girl!"

Will started forward, to snatch Esme away from the centaur. But the other two cantered sideways into his path, blocking him. "Look at her, Sergeant Lucasta. The poor little bugger is as weary as a kitten. She doesn't awaken, even when I pick her up." She handed Esme to her superior, who held the sleeping child against her shoulder.

"We've wasted enough time," Sergeant Lucasta said. "Let's go."

"Should we douse the fire?" Anthea asked.

"Let it burn. This time tomorrow, what fucking difference will it make?"

The second centaur packed up Will's gear with startling efficiency, stowed it in leathern hip-bags and started after her commander. Then the youngest of the three seized Will's arm and effortlessly lifted him onto her back. She reared up and hastily he placed his arms around her waist. "My name is Campaspe." She grinned over her shoulder. "Hang on tight, manling. I'm going to give you the ride of your life."

So began their midnight gallop. Up hill and down they sped, past forests and farms. All the world flowed by like a billowing curtain, a thin veil over something vast, naked, and profound. Will tried to imagine what lay beneath and could not. "Will all this really be destroyed?" he asked. "Is it possible?"

"If you'd been through half the shit *I* have," Campaspe replied, "you would not doubt it for an instant. Rest quiet now, it's a long ride." Taking her at her word, Will laid his cheek against Campaspe's back. It was warm. Her muscles moved smoothly beneath him and between his legs. He became acutely aware of the clean stench of her sweat.

"Hey! Sarge! I think the civilian likes me—he's getting hard!"

"He'll need to mount a stump if he expects to stick it to you," the sergeant replied.

"At least he won't need any petroleum jelly!" Anthea threw in.

"That was . . . I didn't . . ." Will said hastily, as they all laughed.

"Oh, really?" Campaspe's eyes and teeth flashed scornfully. She took his hands from around her waist and placed them firmly on her breasts. "Deny it now!"

Horried, Will snatched his hands away, almost fell, and seized Campaspe's waist again. "I couldn't! The Nameless Ones forbid it!"

"It would be bestiality for me too, little ape-hips," she laughed. "But what's a war for, if not to loosen a few rules here and there? Eh, Sarge?"

"Only fucking reason *I* know."

"I knew a gal in the Seventh who liked to do it with dogs," Anthea said. "Big ones, of course. Mastiffs. So one day she . . ." And she went on to relate a story so crude that Will flushed red as her jacket. The others laughed like horses, first at the story and then at his embarrassment.

For hours they coursed over the countryside, straight as schooners and almost as fast. By slow degrees, Will grew accustomed to Campaspe's badinage. She didn't mean anything by it, he realized. But she was young and in a war, and flirted out of nervousness. Again he laid his cheek against her back, and she reached behind her to scratch his head reassuringly. It was then that he noticed the brass badge on her shoulder, and twisted about so he could read it. An image had been worked into the brass, a fine line of moon-silver that glimmered slim and bright by the light of Selene, showing three sword-wielding arms radiant from a common point, like a three-limbed swastika. Will recognized the symbol as the triskelion of the Armies of the Mighty. And he was in their power! He shuddered in revulsion and fear.

Sergeant Lucasta, galloping near, saw this and shifted the slumbering Esme from one shoulder to the other. "So you've caught on at last," she said. "We're the wicked baby-eating enemy. And yet, oddly enough, we're the ones clearing you away from an extremely dangerous situation, rather than your own fucking army. Kind of makes you think, don't it?"

"It's because he's a civilian, right, Sarge? Not much sport in killing civilians," Campaspe said.

"They can't fight and they can't shoot," Anthea threw in. "They're lucky if they know how to bleed."

"Fortunately, they have us to do all those things for them." Sergeant Lucasta held up a hand, and they slowed to a walk. "We should have joined up with the platoon a long time ago."

"We haven't missed 'em," Anthea said. "I can still see their spoor."

"And smell their droppings," Campaspe added.

They had come to a spinney of aspens. "We'll stop here for a bit and rest," the sergeant said, "while I work this thing through in my head."

Campaspe came to a halt and Will slid gratefully from her back. She took a thermos of coffee from a harness-bag and offered him some.

"I . . . I have to take a leak," he said.

"Piss away," she said carelessly. "You don't need *my* permission." And

then, when he started into the woods, "Hey! Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

Again Will flushed, remembering how casually his companions had voided themselves during the night, dropping turds behind them even as they conversed. "My kind needs privacy," he said, and plunged into the brush.

Behind him, he heard Campaspe say, "Well, la-de-da!" to the extreme amusement of her comrades.

Deep into the spinney he went, until he could no longer hear the centaurs talking. Then he unzipped and did his business against the side of a pale slim tree. Briefly, he considered slipping away. The woods were his element, even as open terrain favored the centaurs. He could pass swiftly and silently through underbrush that would slow them to a walk and bury himself so cunningly in the fallen leaves of the forest floor that they would never find him. But did he dare leave Esme with them? Centaurs had no bathroom manners to speak of because they were an early creation, like trolls and giants. They were less subtle of thought than most thinking creatures, more primal in emotion. Murder came to them more easily than spite, lust than love, rapture than pity. They were perfectly capable of killing a small child simply out of annoyance with him for evading their grasp.

Esme meant nothing to him. But still, he could not be responsible for her death.

Yet as he approached the spot where he had left their captors, he heard childish laughter. Esme was awake, and apparently having the time of her life. Another few steps brought him out of the aspens, and he saw Sergeant Lucasta sitting in the grass, forelegs neatly tucked under her, playing with Esme as gently as a mother would her own foal. Will could not help but smile. Females were females, whatever their species, and whatever their allegiance, Esme was probably as safe with these lady-cavaliers as anywhere.

"Again!" Esme shrieked. "Please, again?"

"Oh, very well." Sergeant Lucasta said fondly. She lifted her revolver, gave the cylinder a spin, cocked the hammer, and placed it to the child's forehead.

"Stop!" Will screamed. Running forward, he snatched up Esme into his arms. "What in the name of sanity do you think you're doing?"

The sergeant flipped open the cylinder, looked down into the chamber. "There's the bullet. She would have died if you hadn't stopped me. Lucky."

"I am," Esme said. "I am lucky!"

The centaur snapped the cylinder shut, gave it a spin, and all in one motion pointed it at Esme again and pulled the trigger.

Snap! The hammer fell on an empty chamber.

Esme laughed with delight. "For the sake of the Seven!" Will cried. "She's only a child!" He noticed now, as he had not before, that Campaspe and Anthea were nowhere to be seen. This did not strike him as a good omen.

"She has the luck of innocence," Sergeant Lucasta observed, holstering her revolver. "Twenty-three times I spun the cylinder and fired at her, and every time the hammer came down on an empty chamber. Do you know what the odds are against that?"

"I'm not very good at math."

"Neither am I. Pretty fucking unlikely, though, I'm sure of that."

"I *told* you I was lucky," Esme said. She struggled out of Will's arms. "Nobody ever listens to me."

"Let me ask you a question, then, and I promise to listen. Who is *he*—" she jerked a thumb at Will—"to you?"

"My Papa," Esme said confidently.

"And who am I?"

The little girl's brow furrowed in thought. "My . . . mama?"

"Sleep," said the centaur. She placed a hand on the girl's forehead and drew it down over her eyes. When she removed it, Esme was asleep. Carefully, she laid the child down in the grass. "I've seen this before," she said. "I've seen a lot of things most folks never suspect. She is old, this one, old and far from a child, though she thinks and acts as one. Almost certainly, she's older than the both of us combined."

"How can that be?"

"She's sold her past and her future, her memories and adolescence and maturity, to the Year Eater in exchange for an undying present and the kind of luck it takes for a child to survive on her own in a world like ours."

Will remembered the lie he had told the lubin and experienced a sudden coldness. The tale had come to him out of nowhere. This could not be mere coincidence. Nevertheless, he said, "I don't believe it."

"How did you come to be traveling with her?"

"She was running from some men who wanted to rape her."

"Lucky thing you chanced along." The sergeant patted the pockets of her jacket and extracted a pipe. "There is only a limited amount of luck in this world—perhaps you've noticed this for yourself? There is only so much, and it cannot be increased or decreased by so much as a tittle. This one draws luck from those around her. We should have rejoined our companions hours ago. It was good luck for her to be carried so much further than we intended. It was bad luck for us to do so." She reached into her hip-bags and came out with a tobacco pouch. "The child is a monster—she has no memory. If you walk away from her, she will have forgotten you by morning."

"Are you telling me to abandon her?"

"In a word? Yes."

Will looked down on the sleeping child, so peaceful and so trusting. "I . . . I cannot."

Sergeant Lucasta shrugged. "Your decision. Now we come to the second part of our little conversation. You noticed that I sent my girls away. That's because they like you. They don't have my objectivity. The small abomination here is not the only one with secrets, I think." All the while she spoke, she was filling her pipe with tobacco and tamping it down. "There's a darkness in you that the rookies can't see. Tell me how you came to be traveling by yourself, without family or companions."

"My village cast me out."

The sergeant stuck a pipe into the corner of her mouth, lit it, and sucked on it meditatively. "You were a collaborator."

"That oversimplifies the matter, and makes it out to be something that was in my power to say yea or nay to. But, yes, I was."

"Go on."

"A . . . a dragon crawled into our village and declared himself king. It was wounded. Its electrical system was all shot to hell, and it could barely make itself heard. It needed a lieutenant, a mediator between itself and the village. To . . . give orders. It chose me."

"You did bad things, I suppose. You didn't mean to, at first, but one thing led to another. People disobeyed you, so they had to be punished."

"They hated me! They blamed me for their own weakness!"

"Oh?"

"They wouldn't obey! I had no choice. If they'd obeyed, they wouldn't have been punished!"

"Go on."

"Yes, okay, I did things! But if I hadn't, the dragon would have found out. I would've been punished. They would've been punished even worse than they were. I was just trying to protect them." Will was crying now.

For a long moment the Sergeant was silent. Then she said, "Kill anyone?"

"One. He was my best friend."

"Well, that's war for you. You're not as bad a sort as you think you are, I suspect. In any case, you're neither a spy nor an *agent provocateur*, and that's all that really concerns me. So I can leave you behind with a clean conscience."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're far enough from the epicenter now that you should be safe. And we'll never rendezvous with our platoon unless we ditch the luck-eater." She unholstered her gun and pointed it at the sleeping child. "Shall we try the monster's luck one last time? Or should I shoot it up in the air?"

"In the air," Will said tightly. "Please."

She lifted the gun and fired. The report shattered the night's silence, but did not awaken Esme.

"Lucky again," Sergeant Lucasta said.

Summoned by the gunshot, Campaspe and Anthea trotted back to the spinney's edge. They received the news that the civilians were to be left behind without any visible emotion. But when Will bade them farewell, Campaspe bent, as if to give him a swift peck on the cheek, and then stuck her tongue down his throat and gave his stones a squeeze. Anthea dumped his gear at his feet and playfully swatted him on his aching bum.

The sergeant too leaned down, as if to kiss him. Will stiffened involuntarily. But instead, she said, "Listen to an old campaigner: Trouble will follow you so long as the child is in your care." She straightened. "Keep the lodestar to your left shoulder, and then at dawn walk toward the sun. That will take you east—there are refugee camps just across the Great River. Best not dawdle."

"Thank you."

"Let's go, ladies—this war isn't going to fucking well fight itself!"

The cavaliers cantered off without so much as a backward glance.

Will gently shook Esme awake, shouldered his pack, and took her hand. Eventually they came upon a road and followed it eastward until they

found a junk car in a thicket of sumac alongside an abandoned garage. Will made beds for himself and Esme on the front and back seats. When dawn shone through the windshield, he arose. He divided the last of his food into five parts, gave one to Esme, and put the rest in his pack.

Then they started out again.

At noon, the land behind them turned to smoke. Not long after, an enormous blast reverberated across the land, so loud that refugees crouched in the road with their hands over their ears, and no one could hear properly for an hour afterward. All of the western shire was swallowed up in a deep and profound darkness punctuated by transient goutts of flame as farmhouses and silos were engulfed in molten rock and exploded. Those who had lived within eyeshot raised their voices in anguished shrieks. In an instant, all the generations of lives beyond counting that had been written onto the land were erased from it. It was as if they all, the cherished and the forgotten alike, not only were no more but had ceased ever to have been.

The giants that rose up out of the smoke burned bright as the Holy City itself, hotter than the forges of the sunset. By gradual degrees they darkened and cooled, first to a magma glow, then to a grey barely distinguishable from the clouds. There were two of them, and they carried cudgels. They still shone a ruddy red when they began to wheel and turn upon each other. They were great shadowy bulks, lost in the sky, when their cudgels were hauled as far back and high as they would go.

The giants' motions were slow beyond the eye's ability to discern. But if Will looked away for a few minutes and then back, their positions would be subtly altered. Over the long course of the morning, their cudgels swung toward each other. At noon, they connected. For as long as it would take to count to thirty, the silence was absolute. Then the blast rolled across the land. Will saw it coming, like a great wind making the trees bow down before it. He grabbed Esme and flung them both into a ditch, and so evaded the worst of it.

They walked many miles that day, to the sunset and beyond, though the Great River held itself ever distant and remote. Sometimes they rested, but only briefly. More, Will did not dare. At last, when the first stars were emerging in the sky, Esme began to cry for weariness. Will stooped and, with a grunt, picked her up. His legs did not quite buckle.

Eventually, Esme fell asleep on Will's shoulder. He plodded along for a while, and then a truck driver slowed down and offered to let him sit on the tailgate along with four others, just because Esme looked particularly small and weary. The driver said he was going all the way to the camps, and that with luck they would be there by morning.

So, really, she paid for herself.

Camp Oberon stank of overflowing latrines and pitchpenny magicks. The latter were necessary to compensate for the former. Glamours as fragile as tissue paper were tacked up on almost every tent flap, so that walking down the dirt lanes between canvas dwellings Will caught sudden whiffs of eglantine, beeswax, cinnamon, and wet oak leaves, felt the cold mist of a waterfall, heard the faint strains of faraway elfin music.

None of it was real, or even convincing, but each was a momentary distraction from his surroundings. Whitewashed rocks picked out borders to the meager flowerbeds planted about the older tents.

The camp was situated on a windswept ground high above the Aelfwine. Its perimeters were patrolled but it had no fences—where could anybody go? Thrice daily a contingent of yellow-jackets herded the refugees into mess tents for meals. Between times, the old folks coped with boredom by endlessly reminiscing about lives and villages they would never see again. The younger ones, however, talked politics. “They’ll be shipping us East,” a kobold said knowingly at one such impromptu discussion, “to the belly of the beast, the very heart of Empire, the Tower of Whores itself. Where we’ll each be given a temporary ID card, fifty dollars, a voucher for a month’s housing, and the point of their boots in our backsides for putting them to such expense.”

“They could of saved themselves a shitload of expense by not destroying our fucking homes in the first place,” a dwarf growled. “What’s the fucking point?”

“It’s their policy. Rather than leaving enemies at their borders, they absorb us into themselves. By the time we’ve found our feet through pluck and hard work, our loyalties have shifted and we become good, obedient citizens.”

“Does this work?” Will asked dubiously.

“Not so far.” The kobold got up, unbuttoned the corner flaps of the tent, and took a long piss into the weeds out back. “So far, all it’s done is made them into the most contentious and least governable society in existence. Which surely has something to do with their sending their armies here to solve all our problems for us, but fuck if I know what.” He turned back, zipping his fly.

“This is just venting,” somebody said. “The question is, what should we do?”

From the depths of the tent, where it was a darkness floating in darkness, an uneasy shimmer that the eye could perceive but not resolve into an image, a ghost said, “A trip-wire, a bundle of matches, and some sandpaper can set off a coffee can filled with black powder and carpet tacks. A pinch of chopped tiger’s whiskers sprinkled into food will cause internal bleeding. A lock of hair tied to an albino toad and buried in a crossroads at midnight with the correct incantation will curse somebody with a slow and lingering death. These skills and more I might be convinced to teach to any interested patriots.”

There was an awkward silence, and then several of those present got up and left.

Will joined them.

Outside, the dwarf pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He offered one to Will and stuck a second in the corner of his mouth. “I guess you ain’t no fucking patriot either.”

Will shrugged. “It’s just . . . I asked myself, if I was running this camp, wouldn’t I be sure to have an informer in a group like that?”

The dwarf snorted. He was a red dwarf, with the ginger hair and swarthy complexion of his kind. “You suspect our beloved Commandant

of unethical methods? The Legless One would cry in his fucking beer if he could hear you say that."

"I just think he'd have somebody there."

"Ha! There were ten in the tent. In my experience, that means at least two snitches. One for money and the other because he's a shit."

"You're a cynic."

"I've done time. Now that I'm out, I'm gonna keep my asshole clenched and my hand to the axe. Knawmean?" He turned away. "See ya, kid."

Will ditched the cigarette—it was his first, and he was certain it was going to be his last as well—and went off in search of Esme.

Esme had adapted to the Displaced Persons Camp with an intense joy that was a marvel to behold. She was the leader of whatever gang of children she fell in with, every adult's pet, and every crone's plaything. She sang songs for the bedridden patients in the infirmary and took part in the amateur theatricals. Strangers gave her scraps of cloth so she could play at dress-up and shooed her back whenever she started down the road that led to the cliffs overlooking the Gorge. She could feed herself, a sweetmeat and a morsel at a time, just by hopping from tent to tent and poking her head in to see how everyone was doing. It made things easier for Will, knowing that she was being lovingly watched over by the entire camp. Now he followed the broken half-shilling he carried always in his pocket, straight to its mate, which he'd hung on a cord about Esme's neck.

He found her playing with a dead rat.

From somewhere, Esme had scrounged up a paramedic's rowan wand that still held a fractional charge of vivifying energy and was trying to bring the rat back to life. Pointing the rod imperiously at the wee corpse, she cried, "Rise! Live!" Its legs twitched and scrabbled spasmodically at the ground.

The apple imp kneeling on the other side of the rat from her gasped. "How did you do that?" His eyes were like saucers.

"What I've done," Esme said, "is to enliven its archipallium or reptilian brain. This is the oldest and most primitive part of the central nervous system and controls muscles, balance, and autonomic functions." She traced a circuit in the air above the rat's head. Jerkily, like a badly handled marionette, it lurched to its feet. "Now the warmth has spread to its paleopallium, which is concerned with emotions and instincts, fighting, fleeing, and sexual behavior. Note that the rat is physically aroused. Next I will access the amygdala, its fear center. This will . . ."

"Put that *down*, Esme." It was not Will who spoke. "You don't know where it's been. It might have germs."

The little girl blossomed into a smile and the rat collapsed in the dirt by her knee. "Mom-Mom!"

Mother Griet scowled down from her tent.

There were neighborhoods within the camp, each corresponding roughly to the locale of origin of its inhabitants, the camp officials having long ago given up on their rationalized plans for synthetic social organization. Will and Esme lived in Block G, wherein dwelt all those who belonged nowhere else—misfits and outcasts, loners and those who, like them, had been separated from their own kind. For them, Mother Griet served as a

self-appointed mayor, scolding the indolent, praising those who did more than their share, a perpetual font of new projects to improve the common lot. Every third day she held a pie-powders court, where the "dusty footed" could seek justice in such petty grievances as the Commandant deemed beneath his attention.

Now she gestured imperiously with her walking stick. "Get in here. We have things to discuss." Then, addressing Will, "You too, grandchild."

"Me?"

"Not very quick on the uptake, are ye? Yes, you."

He followed her within.

Mother Griet's tent was larger on the inside than it was on the outside, as Will discovered when he stepped through the flap and into its green shadows. At first, there seemed to be impossibly many tent poles. But as his eyes adjusted, the slim shapes revealed themselves to be not poles but the trunks of trees. A bird flew by. Others twittered in the underbrush. High above floated something that could not possibly be the moon.

A trail led them to a clearing.

"Sit," Mother Griet said. She took Esme in her lap. "When was the last time you brushed your hair, child? It's nothing but snarls and snail shells."

"I don't remember."

To Will, Mother Griet said, "So you're Esme's father. A bit younger than might be expected."

"I'm her brother, actually. Esme's easily confused."

"No kidding. I can't get a straight answer out of the brat." She pulled a hairbrush from her purse and applied it vigorously to Esme's hair. "Don't wriggle." Mother Griet turned to Will, her pale blue eyes astonishingly intense. "How old is she?" Then, when he hesitated, "Is she older than you are?"

"She . . . might be."

"Ah. Then I was right." Mother Griet bowed low over the child's head. The trees around them wavered and the air filled with the smell of hot canvas. Briefly it seemed they were sitting in a tent like any other with a wooden platform floor and six cots with a footlocker resting by each one. Then the forest restored itself. She looked up, tears running down her cheeks. "You're not her brother. Tell me how you met her."

As Will told his tale, Mother Griet dabbed away her tears with a tissue. "Let me tell you a story," she said when he was done. In her lap, Esme flopped over on her back and grinned up at her. The old crone gently stroked her cheek.

"I was born in Corpsecandle Green, a place of no particular distinction, save that it was under a curse. Or so it seemed to me, for nothing there endured. My father died and my mother ran off when I was an infant and so I was raised 'by the village,' as they say. I flitted from house to house, through an ever-changing pageant of inconstant sisters, brothers, tormentors, protectors, and friends. When I came of age, some of these turned to lovers and husbands, and they were inconstant, too. All was flux: My businesses failed, my pipes burst, creditors repossessed my furniture. The only things I dared hope to hold onto were my children. Oh,

such darlings they were! I loved them with every scrap of my being. And how do you imagine they repaid me for it?"

"I don't know."

"The little bastards grew up. Grew up, married, turned into strangers, and moved away. And because their fathers had all wandered into the marshes and died—but that's another story and one I doubt you'll ever hear—I was left alone again, too old to bear another child but wanting one nonetheless.

"So, foolish as I was, I bought a black goat, gilded its horns, and led it deep into the marshlands at midnight. There was a drowning-pool there, and I held it under until it stopped struggling, as a sacrifice to the *genius loci*, begging that puissant sprite for a child that would not treat me as the others had. Such a wail I set up then, in my need and desire, as would have scared away a dire-wolf." She stopped. "Pay attention, boy. There might be a test afterwards."

"I was paying attention."

"Yeah, right. Well, exactly at dawn there was a rustling in the reeds and this child emerged, this beautiful child right here." She tickled Esme, who squirmed and laughed. "She didn't know who she belonged to and she'd forgotten her name—not the first time she'd done so, I warrant—so I called her Iria, 'little island.' Do you remember any of this, sweetness?"

"I don't remember anything," Esme said. "Ever. That way I'm always happy."

"She sold her memory to the—"

"Shush!" Mother Griet said fiercely. "I said you weren't bright. Never mention any of the Seven indoors." She returned to her brushing. "She was like this then, every dawn her first one ever, every evening moon a new delight. She was my everything."

"Then she's yours," Will said with an unexpected pang of regret.

"Look at me, boy, I could die tomorrow. You don't get free of her that easy. Where was I? Oh, yes. For ten or twenty years, I was happy. What mother wouldn't be? But the neighbors began to mutter. Their luck was never good. Cows dried up and cellars flooded. Crops failed and mice multiplied. Sons were drafted, unwed daughters got knocked up, gaffers fell down the cellar stairs. Refrigerator pumps died and the parts to fix them went out of stock. Scarecrows spontaneously caught fire.

"Suspicion pointed the good village-folk straight at the child. They burned down my house and drove me from Corpsecandle Green, alone and penniless, with no place to go. Iria, with her usual good fortune, had wandered off into the marshes that morning and missed her own lynching. I never saw her again—until, as it turns out, these last few days."

"You must have been heartbroken."

"You're a master of the obvious, aren't ye? But adversity is the forge of wisdom and through my pain I eventually came to realize that loss was not a curse laid down upon me or my village, but simply the way of the world. So be it. Had I the power, the only change I'd make would be to restore Iria-Esme-Whatever's name's memory to her."

Esme pouted. "I don't want it."

"Idiot child. If you remember nothing, you learn nothing. How to gut a

fish or operate a gas chromatograph, perhaps, but nothing that *matters*. When death comes to you, he will ask you three questions, and they none of them will have anything to do with fish guts or specimen retention times."

"I'm never going to die."

"Never is a long time, belovedest. Someday the ancient war between the Ocean and the Land will be over, and the Moon will return to her mother's womb. Think you to survive that?" Mother Griet rummaged in her purse. "No, so long as you never die, this happy forgetfulness is a blessing." She rummaged some more. "But nobody lives forever. Nor will you." Her hand emerged triumphant. "You see this ring? Ginarr Gnomesbastard owed me a favor, so I had him make it. Can you read the inscription on the inside?"

Esme brushed the hair out of her eyes. "Yes, but I don't know what it means."

"*Memento mori*. It means 'remember to die.' It's on your list of things to do and if you haven't done it yet, you haven't led a full life. Put the ring on your finger. I whispered my name into it when the silver was molten. Wear it and after I'm gone, whatever else you forget you'll still remember me."

"Will it make me grow up?"

"No, little one. Only you can do that."

"It's not gold," Esme said critically.

"No, it's silver. Silver is the witch-metal. It takes a spell more readily than gold does, and holds it better. It conducts electricity almost as well as gold and since it has a higher melting point, it's far superior for use in electronic circuitry. Also it's cheaper."

"I can repair a radio."

"I bet you can. Go now. Run along and play." She swatted the little girl on the rump and watched her scamper away. Then, to Will, she said, "Your hands are bleeding from a thousand cuts."

He looked down at them.

"It's a figure of speech, ye fool. Each cut is a memory, and the blood is the pain they cause you. You and the child are like Jack and Nora Sprat; she forgets everything, and you remember all. Neither is normal. Or wise. You've got to learn to let go, boy, or you'll bleed yourself to death."

Blood rushed to Will's head and his fists clenched involuntarily. But he bit back the retort that flew to his lips. If he had learned nothing else from dealing with old ladies much like this one in his native village, it was that sassing them back was worse than useless. You had to be polite when you told them to buzz off. He stood. "Thank you for your advice," he said stiffly. "I'm leaving now."

Though it had been a long walk to the clearing, three strides took him out through the tent flap. He stood blinking in the sunlight.

Two yellow-jackets seized his arms.

"Garbage duty," one said. Will had been pressed into such service before. He went unresisting with them to a utility truck. It grumbled through Block G and out of the camp and when the tents were small in the distance, slowed to a halt. One soldier shoved a leather sack over Will's head and upper body. The other wrapped a cord around his waist, lashing him in.

"Hey!"

"Don't struggle. We'd only have to hurt you."

The truck lurched, clashed gears, got up to speed. Soon they were driving uphill. There was only one hill overlooking Camp Oberon, a small, barren one atop which stood the old mansion that had been seized for the Commandant's office. When they got there, Will was prodded through passages that had a musky, reptilian undersmell, as though the house were infested with toads.

Knuckles rapped on wood. "The DP you sent for, sir."

"Bring him in and wait outside."

Will was thrust forward, and the bag untied and whisked from his head. The door closed behind him.

The Commandant wore a short-sleeved khaki shirt with matching tie and no insignia. His head was bald and speckled as a brown egg. His forearms rested, brawny and stiff-haired, on his desk. Casually, he dipped a hand into a bowl of dead rats, picked up one by its tail, tilted his head back, and swallowed it whole. Will thought of Esme's plaything and had to fight down the urge to laugh.

Laughter would have been unwise. The Commandant's body language, the arrogance with which he held himself, told Will all he needed to know about him. Here was a pocket strongman, a manipulator and would-be tyrant, the Dragon Baalthazar writ small. The hairs on the back of Will's neck prickled. Cruelty coupled with petty authority was, as he knew only too well, a dangerous combination.

The Commandant pushed aside some papers and picked up a folder. "This is a report from the Erlking DPC," he said. "That's where your village wound up."

"Did they?"

"They don't speak very highly of you." He read from the report. "Seizure of private property. Intimidation. Sexual harassment. Forced labor. Arson. It says here that you had one citizen executed." He dropped the folder on the desk. "I don't imagine you'd be very popular there, if I had you transferred."

"Transfer me or not, as you like. There's nothing I can do to stop you."

The Commandant sucked his teeth in silence for a long moment. Then he rose up from the desk, so high his head almost touched the ceiling. From the waist down, his body was that of a snake.

Slowly, he slithered forward. Will did not flinch, even when the lamius circled him, leaving him surrounded by loops of body.

"What happened to you, boy? Did it put the needles to you? I see that it did. What did it feel like, sitting in the pilot's couch with the needles in your wrists and that great war-drake slithering around in your mind? They say it changes you. Is that why you won't help us?"

Will looked away.

"You act as if you did something wrong. Hell, you're a hero! If you'd been in the forces, you'd have a medal now. Tell you what. Cooperate, and afterward I'll put you in for officer training. If you do well, there's every chance they'll grandfather you in for the decoration. That's a great deal in return for very little. Do you even know what I want from you?"

Yes, Will thought, I know what you want. You want to put your hand up inside me and manipulate me like a puppet. You want to wiggle your fingers and make me jump. Aloud, he said, "I collaborated once, and it was a mistake. I won't do it again."

"Bold words," the Commandant said, "for somebody who was conspiring with subversives not half an hour ago. You didn't know I had an ear in that meeting, did you?"

"You had two. The ghaast and the dwarf."

For a blank instant, the Commandant said nothing. Then he circled Will again, widdershins this time, freeing him from the coils of his body.

"Enough of your defiance. Either you'll do as I ask, or else you'll leave by the front door and without the courtesy of a bag over your head. How long do you think you'll last then? Once word gets out you're friendly with me?"

Will stared down at his feet and shook his head doggedly.

The Commandant slid to the door and opened it. The two yellow-jackets stood there, silent as grimhounds. "You can stand in the foyer while you think it over. Knock hard when you've made up your mind; this thing's mahogany an inch thick." The lamius smiled mirthlessly. "Or, if you like, the other door's unlocked."

The foyer had a scuffed linoleum floor, an oliphaunt-foot umbrella stand, and a side-table with short stacks of medical brochures for chlamydia, AIDS, evil eye, and diarrhea. Sunlight slanted through frosted panels to either side of the front door. There were two switches for the overhead and outside lights that made a hollow *bock* noise when he flicked one on or off. And that was it.

He wouldn't become the Commandant's creature. On that point he was sure. But he didn't want to be branded an informant and released to the tender mercies of his fellow refugees either. He'd seen what the camp vigilantes did to those they suspected of harboring insufficient solidarity. Back and forth Will strode, forth and back, feverishly working through his options. Until finally he was certain of his course of action. Simply because there was nothing else he *could* do.

Placing his palms flat on its surface, Will leaned straight-armed against the table. Like every other piece of furniture he had seen here, it was solidly built of dark, heavy wood. He walked his feet as far back as he could manage, until he was leaning over the table almost parallel to its surface. He wasn't at all sure he had the nerve to do this.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Then, as quickly as he could, Will whipped his hands away from the table and clasped them behind his back. Involuntarily, his head jerked to the side, trying in vain to protect his nose. His face hit the wood hard.

"Cernunnos!" Will staggered to his feet, clutching his broken nose. Blood flowed freely between his fingers and down his shirt. Rage rose up in him like fire. It took a moment or two to calm down.

He left by the front door.

Will walked slowly through Block A, wearing his blood-drenched shirt like a flag or a biker's colors. By the time he got to the infirmary, word

that he had been roughed up by the yellow-jackets had passed through the camp like wildfire. He had the bleeding stanch and told the nurse that he'd slipped and broken his nose on the edge of a table. After that, he could have run for camp president, had such an office existed, and won. Backslaps, elbow nudges, and winks showered down on him during his long slog home. There were whispered promises of vengeance and muttered obscenities applied to the camp authorities.

He found himself not liking his allies any better than he did his enemies.

It was a depressing thing to discover. So he went on past his tent to the edge of camp, across the railroad tracks, past a casual refuse dump and some abandoned construction equipment, and down the short road that led to the top of the Gorge. The tents were not visible from that place and, despite its closeness, almost nobody went there. It was his favorite retreat when he needed privacy.

The Gorge extended half a mile down-river from the hydroelectric dam to a sudden drop in the land that freed the Aelfwine to run swift and free across the tidewater toward its confluence with the Great River. The channel it had dug down through the bedrock was so straight and narrow that the cliffs on either side were almost perpendicular. The water below was white. Crashing, crushing, tumbling as if possessed by a thousand demons, it was energetic enough to splinter logs and carry boulders along in its current. Anyone trying to climb down the cliffs here would surely fall. But if he ran with all his might and jumped with all his strength, he might conceivably miss the rock and hit the water clean. In which case he would certainly die. Nobody could look down at that raging fury and pretend otherwise.

It was an endlessly fascinating prospect to contemplate: Stone, water, stone. Hardness, turbulence, hardness. Not a single tree, shrub, or flower disturbed the purity of its lifelessness. The water looked cold, endlessly cold.

"Hey, there. Remember me?"

Will spun. Out from behind a rusting bulldozer stepped the lubin who had tried to rape Esme back in Grammareshire. Saligos de Gralloch. Will remembered him in a flash. Everything about the dog-headed creature was familiar—even, when he sauntered forward, his stench. "I certainly remember *you*, young master. The both of ye."

There was a movement behind Saligos as Esme climbed up into the cab of the bulldozer. She plopped herself down on the seat and began yanking at the steering levers, pretending to drive.

"You've lost your hat," Will said. "And what happened to your stickfellas?"

"We had a falling-out. I had to kill them. Good thing I chanced upon the moppet here—otherwise I'd be all by my lonesome."

"Not chance. You broke a pin or button in two when you first found the child and hid half among her clothes against the chance of her slipping away from you. Then, today, you followed the other half here."

"That's very sharp of you," Saligos said. "I note, however, that you didn't say 'my daughter,' but 'the child.' So you're not her father after all. That's two things I've learned today. The other is that she's a retard. She doesn't remember me at all. Think how convenient that would be for somebody of my particular tastes."

"She's not retarded."

"Then she's something just as good." Casually, Saligos removed his belt. "You got cute with me last time we met. That's an imbalance needs addressing. But first, I'm going to tie your wrists to yon machine. You can watch while I do *her*—" he nodded toward Esme, still preoccupied with the bulldozer's controls—"good and hard."

The dragon-darkness was rising up in Will again but this time, rather than fighting it down, he embraced it, letting it fill his brain, so that its negative radiance shone from his eyes like black flame. Ducking his head to keep the lubin from seeing it, he said, "I don't think I can allow that."

"Oh, you can't, eh? And how exactly do you plan to stop me?"

A thrill stirred Will's body then, such as he had not felt since that night when the dragon had entered him and walked him barefoot through the village streets, leaving footprints of flame in his wake. His fury had burned hot as a bronze idol then, and the heat had gone before him in a great wave, withering plants, charring house-fronts, and setting hair ablaze when some unfortunate did not flee from him quickly enough.

Much of the power had come from the war-drake's presence. But the rage—had not the rage then been his and his alone? Dragon Baalthazar had said as much afterward. Had said as well that though the sentence of death was laid down upon his rebel-friend by the dragon, it had been Will's choice and Will's alone that the death be by crucifixion.

"Esme," he said. "I want you to put your hands over your eyes now, and keep them there. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, Papa."

The lubin sneered. "That won't do you no—" His words cut off in a gasp as Will reached forward and seized his forearms.

Will squeezed. Bones cracked and splintered under his fingers. "Do you like it now?" he asked. "Do you like it now that it's happening to *you*?"

Saligos de Gralloch squirmed helplessly in his implacable grip. His lips were moving, though Will could not hear him through the rush of blood pounding in his ears. Doubtless he was pleading for mercy. Doubtless he whimpered. Doubtless he whined. That was exactly what he *would* do.

Will knew the type well.

First the dragon-lust turned the world red, as if he were peering out through a scrim of pure rage, and then it turned his vision black. Time passed. When he could see again, Saligos de Gralloch's mangled body lay steaming and lifeless on the ground beside the bulldozer. Will's fingers ached horribly, and his hands were tarred with blood up to his wrists. The lubin stared blindly upward, teeth exposed in a final, hideous grin. Something that might be his heart lay on the ground beside his ruptured chest.

"Papa?" Esme was still sitting in the bulldozer seat, hands neatly folded in her lap. Her eyes were open and had been for he did not know how long. "Are you all right?"

Sick with revulsion, Will turned away and shook his head heavily from side to side. "You should leave," he said. "Flee me. Run!"

"Why?"

"There is something . . . wrong with me. Something that makes me dangerous."

"That's okay."

Will stared down at his hands. Murderer's hands. His head was heavy and his heart was pounding so hard his chest ached. He was surprised he could still stand. "You don't understand. I've done something very, very bad."

"I don't mind." Esme climbed down from the bulldozer, careful not to step on the corpse. "Bad things don't bother me. That's why I sold myself to the Year Eater."

He turned back and stared long and hard at the child. She looked so innocent. Golden-haired, large-headed, toothpick-legged, skin as brown as a berry. "You don't have any memory," he said. "How do you know about the Year Eater?"

"Everybody thinks I have no memory. That's wrong. I only forget people and things that happen. I remember what's important. You taught me to tickle trout. I remember that. And the contract I made is as clear in my mind as the day I gave up my future for it." She turned her back on what remained of Saligos. "But by this afternoon, I'll have forgotten *him* and what you had to do to him as well."

At Esme's direction, Will rolled the body over the cliff-edge. He did not look away in time to avoid seeing it bounce off the rock below. He kicked the maybe-heart after it. The blood on the dirt looked like that which remained after a deer had been gutted and cleaned. Nobody would think twice about it.

Then Esme led Will to a puddle by the tracks to wash his hands. While he did so, she laundered his shirt, whacking it on a rock until every last trace of gore was gone from it. Wordlessly, she began to sing the tune he had been singing when first he saw her. Despite all that had happened, she was perfectly happy. She was, Will realized then, as damned and twisted a thing as he himself.

In a way, they belonged together.

Mother Griet died a fortnight later not from any neglect or infection but as a final, lingering effect of a curse that she had contracted in her long-forgotten childhood. As a girl, she had surprised the White Ladies in their predawn dance and seen that which none but an initiate was sanctioned to see. In their anger, they had pronounced death upon her at the sound of—*her third crow-caw*, they were going to say but, realizing almost too late her youth and innocence of ill-intent, one of their number had quickly amended the sentence to a-million-and-one. From which moment onward, every passing crow had urged her a breath closer to death.

Such was the story Mother Griet had told Will and so when its fulfillment came he knew it for what it was. That morning she had called to him from a bench before her tent and set him to carding wool with her. Midway through the chore, Mother Griet suddenly smiled and, putting down her work, lifted her ancient face to the sky. "Hark!" she said. "Now, *there's* a familiar sound. The black-fledged Sons of Corrin have followed us here from—"

Gently, then, she toppled over on her side, dead.

* * *

The citizens of Block G honored Mother Griet's death with the traditional rites. Three solemn Words were carved upon her brow. Her abdomen was cut open, and her entrails read. In lieu of an aurochs, a stray dog was sacrificed. Then they raised up her corpse on long poles to draw down the sacred feeders, the vultures, from the sky. The camp's sanitary officers tried to tear down the sun-platform, and the ensuing argument spread and engulfed the camp in three days of rioting.

In the wake of which, railroad trains were brought in to take them all away. To far Babylonia, the relief workers said, in Fäerie Minor where they would build new lives for themselves, but no one believed them. All they knew of Babylonia was that the streets of its capitol were bricked of gold and the ziggurats touched the sky. Of one thing they were certain: No villager could thrive in such a place. It was not even certain they could survive. All pledged therefore a solemn oath to stay together, come what may, to defend and protect one another in the unimaginable times ahead. Will mouthed the pledge along with the rest, though he did not believe a word of it.

They were sitting alongside their baggage—Will's knapsack and a gryphon-leather valise Mother Griet had left to Esme—when the first train pulled in. The yellow-jacketed soldiers had set up a labyrinthine arrangement of cattle chutes and were feeding the refugees into it according to a system of numbered cards they had handed out earlier. Will and Esme had high numbers, so they watched the jostling crowds from a distance.

"Do you have everything?" he asked, for the umpteenth time.

"Yes," she replied, as always. Then, suddenly, "No! I don't have my ring, the one that somebody gave me. The silver one that I like so much."

"Little scatterbrain. You took it off when you went to sleep, and it rolled under the bed. That's where I found it, anyway." He dug the bauble out of his pocket. "I've been holding onto it for you for a week."

"Gimme it!" She thrust the ring on her finger.

In that very instant, she began to wail as if her heart were broken.

"What is it?" Will cried in alarm. "What's the matter?"

He took the child in his arms, but she was inconsolable. "She's dead," she said. "Griet is dead." He made hushing noises, but she kept on crying. "I remember her!" she insisted. "I remember now."

"That's good." Will groped for the right words to say. "It's good to remember people you care about. And you mustn't be unhappy about her dying. She led a long and productive life, after all."

"No!" she sobbed. "You don't understand. Griet was my daughter."

"What?"

"She was my sweetness, my youngest, my light. Oh, my little Grietchen! She brought me dandelions in her tiny fist. Damn memory! Damn responsibility! Damn time!" Esme tugged off her ring and flung it away from her. "Now I remember why I sold my age in the first place."

She wept into Will's shoulder. He hugged her, rocking back and forth. "Hush," he sang to her, "hush, ah hush." It was the song of the scythe on a hot summer's day. "Hush."

She was just a child, after all, whatever else she might be. ○

THE DEFENDERS

Colin P. Davies

Colin P. Davies is a building surveyor from Liverpool, England. His stories have appeared in *Beyond*, *Spectrum SF*, *3SF*, and *Paradox* and are due soon in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* and *Elysian Fiction*. A three year veteran of the Milford SF Writers' Conference, he is currently completing a comic fantasy novel for young adults.

Finally, Grandfather slowed the dinghy, and the retinue of iridescent wakefish skated away under a punishing noon sun.

Elisa leaned over the side and watched another wavering giant carcass pass below while Grandfather whistled a tune far older than Elisa's thirteen years.

"That's enough!" she said—then softer, "I've seen enough."

"And do you still consider me wicked?" Grandfather pushed back his white cap and wiped a crumpled handkerchief across his brow. He stopped the engine. The gentle splashing faded along with the murmur of the power unit.

"I never did think you were wicked."

Elisa scanned the horizon. From this far out in the Spherical Ocean, none of the archipelago was visible.

New Sicily was two hours to the west. She'd never traveled so far from Homeport, from people, before. The knowledge of isolation was like a hand squeezing her lungs—just her and Grandfather and an ocean a world wide.

She gazed again into the clear shallow water of the plateau, at the graveyard of great white bones. "How big is the battlefield?"

Grandfather held his arms wide so that his white shirt caught the breeze. "Vast. I watched from a prudent distance."

"I can't see the bodies of any demons. You said they're as big as the defenders."

"The winged demons are there—trust me. Look again . . . you may see their bronze spears."

"I see only my children." Elisa took off her brimmed grassweave hat and pulled her red hair back from her face. She touched a fingertip to her

cheek, hoping for a tear, but found none. The sun burned on her scalp and she replaced the hat.

Grandfather shifted uncomfortably on his seat. "I think you stretch the point a little too far." He crouched forward and rummaged in a canvas bag, coming up with a pair of binoculars.

"Okay—maybe not children."

"You're a resource, Elisa, and I'm a creator. I don't have feelings of guilt."

"And yet you brought me out here."

"You're my granddaughter . . . I was coming here . . . and you *asked*." With the binoculars, he examined the sky to the east. "Besides . . . I thought you might learn something."

Elisa trailed her fingers in the water. The coolness surprised her, yet it seemed fitting for this place of the dead. She had come here looking for emotion, for a connection . . . or at least a reaction. But she was unmoved. Her heart was as cold as the ocean.

The monsters on the sea bed—those flying behemoths that had defended Homeport from the demons' attack, that had battled in a sky dark with wings and flesh, with blood falling like rain—were a *part* of her, created *from* her. The house-sized skull, the ribs like rafters, cells of her cells. What had she expected to feel?

"Grandfather . . . you're certain none survived?" She dried her fingers on her shorts.

He lowered the glasses. "When the spotters called, we sent out your litter. The demons fled, and no defenders returned to the labyrinth. Now only harvester fish inhabit the nest."

"What if the demons return?"

"They *will* return, in time. But we will always have another litter."

"But not mine."

"You've done your duty. No one will ask you again."

"I'm curious. . . . How does it feel to create life only for it to be destroyed? To create with that very aim? Doesn't it bother you?"

Grandfather sighed. "It has become a necessity. How else could we hold the demons back? It must be hard for you to understand."

"No, it's not hard." Understanding came easily—it was *emotion* that was hard. Elisa searched for melancholy, or grief. All she could find was discomfort in the harsh heat of the sun. "I'd like to believe that mine died heroically, that somehow a bit of my personality lived in them."

"Defenders have no choice. They fight, they return to the nest. They're *designed* to have no choice—is that heroic?"

"You're a cold-hearted old soldier, Grandfather. They're not machines. You told me that they can feel."

He nodded. "Of *course* they feel. They feel love for us. Why else would they die for us?"

Grandfather returned the binoculars to the bag by his feet; when he straightened up, he was holding a small radio or communicator. He extended an aerial and tapped a fingertip on the keys. "Sometimes I wonder who the real defenders are," he said.

"What do you mean? You made them. You should know."

"And who are the real demons. . . ."

"Whoever they are, one day you'll find them and destroy them—right?"

He smiled at her. "This is their world. *Humans* are the intruders here."

"What are you doing?" she said, pointing a finger at the radio in his hand.

"Fishing."

The sun burned down upon Elisa's brown shoulders; her pink vest offered little protection. She didn't want to be here any more.

"I've seen enough, Grandfather. I want to go back."

"Just a little while. . . . I'm almost done."

"What if the defenders loved themselves more than they loved us?"

"You're a strange one, Elisa. Full of questions. No one has asked me such questions before."

"Maybe I'm not like everyone else."

"They *have* to love us more than life. Our survival here depends on it. But I'm no fool. I have planned for surprises."

"I think I don't have it in me to be a martyr."

"You'll have time to . . ."

His words fell away as the sea heaved and the boat rocked as something passed beneath them. Elisa peered into the water, but only glimpsed a darkness through the flashes of reflected sun. A moment of quiet and trepidation, and then a huge shape burst from the water three hundred meters distant. Out of a fountain of spray, a monstrous creature took to the air. It turned in their direction as a wave rushed toward the boat.

"A defender!" Elisa screamed as the dinghy tossed and threw her about. She clamped her fingers to the seat.

The creature climbed above them on black reptilian wings, then swooped and circled low, its scythe-like claws slicing the wave tops. The massive head retained human characteristics, but exaggerated and drawn forward into a spike-tipped snout. The chitin-plated neck seemed unfeasibly slender, but allowed for maneuverability in the air and for slashing strokes with the serrated tusks. A magnificent beast that had proved the equal of the self-destructive recklessness of the brown-furred demons.

"It's one of mine!" Elisa cried. "It must be!"

The defender rose and blocked out the sun for a moment, sweeping the air back to gain height, then banked and returned to dive toward them.

"Yes, it's one of mine," she said. "And it must be smarter than the rest. It found out how to hide and survive."

The defender was calling—a howl as mournful as a lost child's—as it swept so low over them that Elisa's hair was blown about her face. She caught the creature's seaweed scent. "It's because of *me*, isn't it, Grandfather? My defender is different. It has my spirit. It made its own choices. It's stronger, brighter. . . . It could become a leader."

The defender came around again and glided overhead, and there came a crack and a thud and a large smouldering blue-sky hole appeared in the creature's body . . . and it screamed and reeled and plunged from the sky . . . crashed into the water some distance away.

Elisa cried and grasped the side of the rocking boat. "Grandfather. . . ." She saw him push down the aerial. "You killed it! It was *you*. Why? Why did you kill it?"

She watched as the great body was sucked beneath the surface. First whirlpools, then cold boiling, then calmness. This was terrible. A tragedy. She could have had the best defender ever!

"Grandfather?"

He dropped the transmitter into the bag and stared down at the water. She could not see his face. Though she spoke to him, again and again, he would not reply. Slowly, the boat ceased its agitated motion.

The sun crawled across the sky.

Finally, Grandfather started the engine and directed the dinghy toward Homeport. ○

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LIBERATION DAY

Allen M. Steele

"Liberation Day" is the seventh story in the author's second Coyote series. It closely follows the events of "Shady Grove" from our July issue. The book-length version of this series, *Coyote Rising*, will be published by Ace in hardcover in December. Mr. Steele tells us that he still lives "in western Massachusetts with my wife and two dogs, and a kayak that I occasionally put in the water when I'm not writing science fiction."

Kafziel, Asmodiel 5, c.y. 06 / 0503—West Channel, New Florida

Darkness lay heavy upon the north shore; sunrise was still a half-hour away, and the stars had yet to disappear from the night sky. Bear hung low above the western horizon, its ring-plane rising above the channel. The winter snow had melted a few weeks earlier, and a cool breeze stirred the tall grasses of the marshlands surrounding the inlet of North Creek; the grasshoppers were still asleep in their nests, though, and the birds had yet to begin to hunt. A new day was coming to that part of Coyote as it always had, in peaceful serenity, heretofore untouched by the hand of man.

Now there were new sounds: murmured voices, wooden paddles faintly bumping against canoe gunnels. From time to time, thin beams of light moved across black waters, briefly exploring the shoreline before disappearing once more. Tiny wavelets lapped against the sandy beach, forced ahead by low shapes that glided quietly toward shore.

As the lead canoe approached the inlet, the figure hunched in its bow stroked in reverse, gently slowing his craft. The keel softly crunched against sand, and he briefly thrust the paddle downward to test the depth. Then, carefully balancing himself upon the gunnels, he stood up and stepped over the side, his boots splashing through calf-deep water.

Pulling a light from his jacket pocket, Carlos Montero aimed it toward the channel and flashed three times. A moment passed, then from the darkness there was a rapid succession of flashes in response. Putting the light away, he took a moment to look around. He was almost home. And this time, he was bringing a few friends with him. . . .

"I could use a hand here." Chris Levin had climbed out and was wading ashore. "Unless you're busy admiring the view, of course."

"Sorry." Carlos turned to help him haul the canoe ashore. "Never seen this part of the island before."

"Who has?" Chris bent down to loosen the ropes of the tarp covering their gear. "But you look like you're posing for a picture. Like Washington crossing the . . . y'know, whatever."

"Hey, if you've got a camera . . ."

"Left it behind, George. Maybe next time."

The rest of the flotilla was approaching the shore: canoes, pirogues, a couple of keelboats, more than three dozen boats in all. The thin light cast by masked lamps illuminated shadowed figures as they climbed overboard to pull their craft onto dry land. They moved quickly, wasting as little time as possible; with sunrise fast approaching, they'd have to hurry to make camp before daybreak.

Over the course of the last nine days, eighty-six men and women, from settlements all across Midland, had navigated the Medsylvania Channel from their departure point at New Boston. They'd traveled under the cover of darkness, sleeping during the day under camouflage nets so as not to be spotted by low-flying aircraft. Two nights ago, Red Company had crossed the confluence of the East Channel, where the Medsylvania Channel became the West Channel, until they'd reached the northeastern tip of New Florida. From there, North Creek flowed south to Sand Creek, which in turn led straight to Liberty. Carlos noticed that they all kept their voices low, as if expecting a Union Guard patrol somewhere nearby. Liberty was a long way from there, but no one was taking any chances.

Hearing someone coming up behind him, he looked around to see his sister walking toward him. "Spotted a small blackwood grove about fifty yards that way," Marie said quietly. "I think we can make camp there."

"Very good. Take as much equipment as we need, leave everything else here." Carlos turned to two men standing nearby. "You and you . . . pull out the nets and start covering the boats. I want everything under wraps before the sun comes up."

"Got it, Rigil," one of them said. More than half of Red Company still referred to him as Rigil Kent, the alias he'd chosen for himself long ago, even though they now knew his real name. *Just as well*, he thought. *If this fails, that'll probably be the name they carve onto my tombstone.*

That was an uncomfortable notion, so he sought to avoid it. "You got the satphone?" he asked Chris.

Chris had just unloaded their packs. He glanced at his watch, then gazed up at the night sky. "Little early for that, don't you think? *Alabama* isn't due over for another hour or so. We don't even know if they . . ."

"You're right. Just skittish, that's all." He hesitated. "Wish I knew where the other guys are."

Chris bent over one of the packs, loosened its flap, and dug inside until he found the satphone. "Relax," he said softly as he handed it to Carlos. "You've done as much as you can. It's up to them now."

Carlos nodded. A hundred and seventy miles southeast of their position, Blue Company would be paddling across the East Channel, making

landfall at the Garcia Narrows. A couple of thousand miles away, White Company was hiding somewhere along the eastern coast of Midland, watching the bluffs of Hammerhead across the Midland Channel. And meanwhile, out in space. . . .

"If you're going to pitch this one. . . ." Chris began.

Carlos glanced at him, not knowing at first what he was talking about, then realized that he'd been holding the satphone for a long time now. Chris was remembering the day, long ago, when Carlos had unwisely thrown a satphone into Sand Creek. "If I did, would you. . . ?"

"Hey, what's that?" Chris pointed past him. "Look over there."

Carlos turned around. For a moment, he didn't see what his friend had spotted. Then he saw it: an orange-red radiance low upon the eastern horizon, faintly illuminating the undersides of morning clouds. For a moment, he thought they'd miscalculated the time before local sunrise. But dawn wasn't due for at least another half-hour, and although the glow flickered faintly, it didn't subside as heat lightning would do. Whatever it was, it was coming from Midland.

And, suddenly, he realized what he was seeing.

"Oh, God," he whispered. "Not now. Please, not now. . . ."

0532—CSS *Plymouth*

"**R**ange three hundred yards and closing." Kim Newell barely looked up from her controls; her gaze was locked upon the computer screens, her left hand steady upon the yoke as she gently fired a quick burst from the forward RCRs. "On course for rendezvous. Standby for docking maneuver."

"Roger that." Robert Lee instinctively reached up to tap his headset mike before he remembered that there was no reason to activate the ship-to-ship radio. Indeed, there was little for him to do at that point; Kim was in the left seat, and she knew the *Plymouth* much better than he did. All he was doing was riding shotgun.

So he gazed up through the canopy and watched as the *Alabama* steadily moved closer. It didn't look the same way as the last time he'd seen her—over four and a quarter years ago by the LeMarean calendar, he reminded himself, or nearly thirteen years by Gregorian reckoning. Five hundred feet in length, the starship filled the cockpit windows, yet five of the seven crew modules that had once formed a ring around its forward section were missing—they'd been jettisoned shortly after *Alabama* had arrived—and the shuttle cradles along its central boom were empty. The aft navigation beacon had burned out, leaving the engine section in the dark, and long-term exposure to solar radiation and micrometeorites had warped and pitted some of the hull plates. The ship had survived a 230-year voyage from Earth, but it was meant to travel between the stars, not to linger in high orbit around a planet-sized moon of a super-jovian. After so many years of being subjected to the effects of space weather, the giant vessel was slowly falling apart, like a sailing ship left to rot at the wharf.

All the same, though, it was good to see the old lady again. As Kim coaxed the *Plymouth* closer, Lee felt his throat grow tight. It had been a long while since he'd considered himself a starship captain. Now, at least for a brief time, he would be the commanding officer of the URSS *Alabama* once more.

He felt a hand upon his shoulder. "A little worse for wear," Dana Monroe murmured, floating next to him in the narrow cockpit, "but she's still there." She gazed up at the ship. "Glad you made the trip?"

"Yeah. Sure." Lee took his mate's hand, gave it a squeeze. "Ready to play chief engineer again?"

She gave him a hard look. "Play chief engineer? Sir, that is an insult. . . ."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to question your professional. . . ."

"Oh, cut it out." She leaned forward to give him a kiss on the cheek. "But if it's play you've got in mind," she whispered in his ear, "if we get a chance maybe we can see if there's still a bunk where we can . . ."

"Range fifty feet and closing." Kim nudged the thruster bar again. "Six . . . five . . . four . . . three. . . ." There was a sudden jar as *Plymouth's* dorsal hatch mated with *Alabama's* docking collar. "Rendezvous complete, Captain."

The maneuver caused Dana to bump the back of her head against the canopy. She muttered an obscenity beneath her breath, but Kim didn't notice; instead, she let out her breath, then reached forward to shut down the engines. Lee gazed at her with admiration. Kim claimed that flying a shuttle was like riding a bicycle, but they both knew that operating a spacecraft was far more complex than that; considering how long it had been since the last time she'd piloted *Plymouth*, her performance had been outstanding. True, she had been rehearsing this mission for the past two months, borrowing time from her farm chores to perform flight simulations in the cockpit, but the fact remained that *Plymouth* hadn't moved an inch since it had been covered with camouflage nets. In that time, Kim had been more concerned with raising a little boy with her husband. And now that Tom Shapiro was gone . . . but it wasn't the time to mourn for lost friends.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Ever since they'd lifted off from Defiance six hours ago, they had subconsciously reverted to their former United Republic Service ranks. Old habits die hard, even after so many years. "How's the airlock pressure?"

Kim looked up to check a gauge. "Equalized. We're okay to pop the hatch."

Lee unbuckled his harness and pushed himself out of his seat. Kim followed him. Dana had already left the cockpit, floating back to the passenger compartment to undog the ceiling hatch. She pulled it open, then moved aside, allowing him the captain's privilege of being the first person aboard.

Lee squirmed up the narrow manhole and found the zebra-striped panel that covered the controls for the inner hatch. Flipping it open, he pushed a couple of buttons. The airlock hissed slightly as it irised open, revealing darkness beyond. Deck H5 was pitch-black save for a couple of small red diodes on a wall panel on the opposite side of the ready-room.

The air was cold, with a faintly musty odor. With the heat turned down, the ship was colder than he'd expected; he was glad he was wearing a catskin jacket and trousers rather than his old URS jumpsuit.

He unclipped a penlight from his belt, then glided over to the wall panel. Recessed lights within the low ceiling flickered to life, revealing the narrow compartment. Everything looked much the same as he'd left it, down to the empty hardsuits stowed in their apertures and the fungal growth they'd discovered on the consoles shortly after they'd awoken from biostasis.

Dana followed him, but Kim hovered within the airlock. "Look, you guys don't need me," she said. "Maybe I ought to stay back, keep the boat warm."

She was clearly unsettled by the silence, and Lee couldn't blame her. It felt strange to be back here again. "Suit yourself. See you in a few."

"Thanks, Captain. And . . . the docking cradle?"

"I'll take care of it topside." *Plymouth* was mated to *Alabama* only by its docking collar; until they entered the bridge and reactivated the AI, Kim would be unable to remote-operate the cradle that secured the shuttle to the ship. A minor safety precaution, but best not to leave anything to chance. "We'll be back soon. Don't go away."

"Not without you. Good luck." Kim retreated to the shuttle, careful to close the inner hatch behind her. Lee watched her go; then he and Dana pushed themselves over to the central access shaft leading up through the ship's core.

The darkened shaft echoed softly as they floated upward, its tunnel walls reverberating with the sound of their hands grasping the ladder rungs. Lee was tempted to make a brief tour of his ship, yet there was no reason to do so; with most of the crew modules missing, there was little to be seen, save the hibernation modules and the engineering and life-support compartments farther up the hub. He briefly considered climbing up to the ring corridor on Deck H1, where Leslie Gillis—poor Les, condemned to a solitary existence for thirty-five years—had painted a vast mural across its walls. Sometime in the future, he'd have to visit the ship again, perhaps even dismantle the bulkheads and have them shipped home so that Gillis's artwork could be preserved for future generations. But now wasn't the time.

Lee stopped at Deck H4, undogged the hatch and pushed it open. The command compartment was cold and dark, with only a few muted lights gleaming from beneath brittle, fungus-covered plastic covers that shrouded the consoles and instrument panels. The rectangular portholes remained shuttered; the chill air held a faint scent of dust and mildew. Something on the far side of the compartment moved; when he aimed his penlight at it, he spotted a maintenance 'bot scuttling away upon spidery legs.

"Like a haunted house," Dana said softly. "Only we're the ghosts."

She'd felt it, too. "Let's make this a little less spooky." Lee turned to a wall panel next to the hatch, found the switch that illuminated the compartment. "All right, we're in. Let's go to work."

Dana went straight for the com station. She pulled aside the cover and shoved it beneath the console, then tapped a few instructions into the

keyboard. "Just as I figured," she murmured, studying the screen. "Main antenna's been disabled. Won't track incoming signals."

Of course. The Union had figured out that the resistance movement was using satphones to keep in touch with one another. Once they'd knocked out *Alabama's* ground-to-space relay system, the members of Rigil Kent had no longer been able to communicate across long distances. "Can you fix it?"

"No sweat. I'll reboot the AI, and then I'll have you enter your code prefix. Once that's done, I can realign the antenna. With any luck, we'll have the satphones back in thirty minutes, tops." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Take a break. I'll call when I need you."

"Thank you, Chief." Lee pushed himself over to his chair. It had been many years since the last time he'd sat here; the soft leather was cracked and worn, and creaked softly as he settled into it. He had to search for the belt straps that held him in place, and it was another minute before he remembered how to open the lapboard. How strange. He could skin a creek-cat, milk a goat, chop down a faux-birch, make a fire with damp wood . . . yet now his hands wavered above the keypad, uncertain of what to do next.

He sighed, shook his head. *Come on, Lee, get on with it. There're people down there depending on you.*

He took a moment to lock down the *Plymouth*. And then, almost as if of its own accord, his right hand sought out the controls that operated the window shutters. Dana was still at the com station keyboard, awakening the ship's computer from its long slumber; he had a couple of minutes to kill, and it had been many years since he'd enjoyed the pleasure of looking down upon a world from space. As the shutters slowly rose, he unfastened his belt again, then guided himself hand-over-hand along the ceiling rails until he reached the nearest porthole.

From an altitude of four hundred fifty miles, Coyote lay before him as a vast blue-green plane that curved away at either end, its clear skies flecked here and there with tiny clouds. 47 Ursae Majoris had risen from behind the planet; Lee winced and held up his hand, then the glass polarized, blocking the worst of the glare. *Alabama* was passing over the daylight terminator; looking down, he could see the first rays of dawn, just touching the east coast of New Florida.

With any luck, Red Company and Blue Company would be in position by now. Once he and Dana reactivated *Alabama's* communications system, the two teams, along with White Company, would be able to talk to one another via satphone, coordinating their movements without fear of having their transmissions intercepted by the Union Guard. At that point, the operation would enter its second phase. But until then, he could steal a few moments to . . .

Something caught his eye: a brownish-red cloud hovering just below the horizon. *Alabama* had crossed the East Channel and was above the western side of Midland; now they were above the Gillis Range, he could see that the cloud lay above the subcontinent's eastern half. At first he thought it might be a storm front, but there had been no indication of foul weather when *Plymouth* had lifted off. The closest edge of the formation

seemed to taper downward; like the funnel of an enormous tornado, it rose from the high country past Longer Creek, where . . .

"No," he murmured. "This can't be happening."

"Robert?"

Lee didn't respond. He'd heard his wife, but only faintly, as if from a thousand feet away. It wasn't until she'd pushed herself across the command deck and gently touched his arm that he pointed down at the massive fumarole below them. It took a few moments for her to realize what she was looking at; when she did, he heard her gasp.

"Oh, lord . . . that's Mt. Bonestell, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." He took a deep breath. "Hurry up with the com system. We've got a problem."

0551—Mt. Bonestell, Midland

When the world came to an end, when the apocalypse finally arrived, it was with all the fury and thunder foretold by the biblical scriptures Sareech had read long ago.

First the ground shook, an earthquake that rippled the mountainside as if Satan himself had suddenly flexed his arms somewhere in the caverns of Hell. He could hear trees snapping as if they were little more than dry twigs, the vast forest crashing down upon itself in waves of percussion that steadily moved toward him, and throughout was the odor of sulfur, heavy and poisonous, as the morning sun disappeared behind a thick, black pillar of smoke that ascended upward into the heavens, blocking out the dawn, eradicating all warmth, all light, all hope.

The *chireep* were in full panic. For many days, they had felt the tremors, smelled noxious odors rising from the flanks of Corah, the mountain upon which they had built their city. Some had fled—the unfaithful, those who were more afraid of Corah than Sareech's holy wrath—but most remained behind, believing that their god-from-the-sky would save them. Now they swarmed through the tunnels of the cliff dwellings even as the walls began to cave in, burying alive the young and elderly; they huddled together parapets, crying out to him in words that he barely understood:

Save us, Sareech! Rescue us! The destroyer has awakened! Use your powers to send Corah away! We call upon you, please stop this!

This was the moment for which Sareech knew he'd been destined. Many years ago, far beyond the stars, he'd been Zoltan Shirow. He had been born a human, had lived his early life in that mortal shell, understanding nothing of the cosmos until the Holy Transformation had occurred. Not recognizing his own divinity, believing himself to be a mere prophet, he'd traveled to this world with his followers, only to discover that, as humans, they were inherently sinful, damned beyond hope of redemption.

One by one, his congregation had perished in the mountains; only one among them had he managed to save, after they'd consumed the bodies

of the others in order to stay alive. Greer stood beside him; her body had become frail to the point that she was unable to walk without the aid of a stick, and her blue-green eyes had grown dark and haunted, her hair grey and matted. It had been a long time since he'd last heard her speak, yet she was still his consort even though she was no longer able to share communion with him.

Nonetheless, she was a holdover from his past. The *chireep* were his true people. They'd found him, worshipped him as a god, and in doing so had helped Zoltan discover his destiny. He was not a prophet, but far more. He was Sareech, capable of taming the Destroyer.

So as the ground quaked and ancient forests tumbled and the air itself became foul, Sareech stood his ground. Standing on top of a wooden platform high above the cliff dwellings, he raised his arms, let his bat-like wings unfold to their farthest extremity.

"I am Sareech!" he shouted. "I am God!"

As he spoke, a hideous black curtain rumbled down the mountainside, a wall of superheated ash that ignited the undergrowth, setting bushes and fallen trees ablaze. Now even the bravest of the *chireep* were running away; chirping madly, they scrambled downhill in one last, desperate effort to escape. Two of his followers clutched at his legs, their oversize eyes insane with terror, their claws digging into his calves and knees, no longer even praying for salvation but merely hoping that death would be swift.

Only his consort remained unmoved. Beneath the cowl of her ragged white robe, she stared at him, ignoring the ash descending upon them. Her eyes challenged him, daring him to justify his claim to divinity.

Now was the time. It was within his power to perform a miracle; this was the moment when he would conquer the elements. Opening his hands, Sareech reached forth, calling upon the black mass hurtling toward him to part on either side, just as Moses had once willed the Red Sea to open wide and allow the escape of the Children of Israel.

"I am Sareech! I am. . .!"

"Go to hell," she said.

And then a wall of ash struck them with the force of a hurricane. He had one last glimpse of his consort—her head lowered, her eyes shut, her tattered robe catching fire—before she was swept away like an angel in flames.

In the next instant he was pitched off the parapet, hurled toward the ground far below. As hot ash filled his lungs, roasting him from the inside out, and his skin was flayed and his wings were ripped from his back, he had one last thought, as if a solemn and merciless voice had finally spoken to him.

You are not God.

0610—Midland Channel

Barry Dreyfus blew into his cupped hands, then stamped his feet on the skimmer's forward deck. The sun had come up only a short while ear-

lier, but it didn't make the morning feel any warmer; a chill breeze blew across the channel, kicking up small whitecaps on the dark blue waters. He craved a cup of hot coffee, but was unwilling to venture below to brew a pot on the camp stove they'd brought with them. It was his turn to stand overnight watch while the others slept; so close to enemy territory, he didn't dare leave his post.

The missile carrier lay at anchor within a small lagoon, concealed by the willow-like fronds of parasol trees he and his father had cut shortly after they'd arrived last night. It'd taken over a week for White Company to make the journey down Goat Kill Creek from Defiance to the Great Equatorial River, then east along Midland's southern coast until they reached the confluence of the Midland Channel, then northwest up Midland's east coast until they reached the narrowest point of the channel, directly across from Hammerhead. Although the captured Union Guard hovercraft was capable of thirty knots, they had traveled only at night, weighing anchor just offshore during daytime. There had been one close brush. Five days ago, a Union gyro had flown over them when they'd stopped near Longer Creek. Fortunately, the aircraft didn't spot them, and since then they had seen no other patrols.

He tried not to think about how cold and tired he was. His shift had ended ten minutes ago, but he was reluctant to wake anyone up. His father, Paul Dwyer, Ted LeMare . . . they were curled up in the hovercraft's tiny cabin, and needed all the rest they could get. Twenty miles away, across the broad delta north of Barren Isle that marked the confluence of Midland Channel and Short River, lay Hammerhead, and high upon its rugged granite bluffs was Ft. Lopez.

Barry could barely make out Hammerhead from the distance, yet during the night he'd seen the lights of Ft. Lopez, watched gyros taking off now and then. If all went according to plan, in the morning they would attempt to take the Union Guard stronghold out of commission by launching the skimmer's rockets against its landing field. With any luck, they might be able to destroy the fort's gyros and military shuttles. Ft. Lopez was unassailable by ground force, but it was vulnerable to its own weapons. All White Company had to do was maneuver the missile carrier within striking range, and the balance of power on Coyote would shift. Red Company and Blue Company would do the rest.

If all went according to plan, that is. Barry didn't want to think about how many things could go wrong. . . .

Hearing the cabin hatch creak open, he looked around to see his father climb up the short ladder. Jack Dreyfus peered at his son through bleary eyes. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I'm okay." Barry shrugged, gave the old man a grin. "If you want to sleep longer . . ."

"Stop it. You sound like your mother." Jack stepped onto the deck, then arched his back and yawned. "I could kill the jackass who designed these things. No room for a man to get any sleep. And with Paul snoring all night . . ."

"Yeah, uh-huh." Barry had heard the same complaints every morning for the last week. His father never stopped thinking like an engineer. He

and Paul Dwyer had restored the skimmer to operating condition after it had been shot to pieces during the Battle of Defiance. Considering their limited resources, they had done a superlative job. Jack was a perfectionist, though; nothing anyone else ever did was good enough for him. "Did you make some coffee?"

"Ted's up. He's working on it now." Jack stretched his arms, then turned his back to his son. "I need to take a . . . hey, what the hell is that?"

Barry turned to look in the direction his father was gazing. Until then, his attention had been focused upon Hammerhead; he hadn't looked to the west, toward Midland. At first he saw only the lagoon—nothing unusual there—but then his eyes moved upward, and he saw a thick blanket moving through the sky. Clouds that looked like black cotton boiled across the heavens; deep within them, he could see flashes of lightning.

"Storm coming in," he said. "We're about to get hit."

"Uh-uh. That's no storm." And indeed, the clouds were darker than any Barry had ever seen before, either on Earth or on Coyote. They resembled smoke from a burning oil refinery, or maybe a coal mine that had been set ablaze. And they were moving *fast*. "That's so weird," Jack added, absently rubbing the stubble of his new beard. "It's almost like . . ."

Feet rang against the cabin ladder, then Ted appeared within the open hatch. "*Alabama* just called in. They say . . ." Then he glanced up at the darkening sky. "Oh, hell. . . ."

Jack turned toward him. "What's going on?"

"Mt. Bonestell just blew." Ted's eyes were fixed upon the menacing clouds. "And it's coming our way."

0656—Defiance, Midland

The eruption couldn't be seen from the colony—Mt. Bonestell lay over the horizon, and the closer mountains of the Gillis Range blocked the plume from sight—but the townspeople had been awakened by tremors so violent that treehouses had creaked ominously in the swaying blackwoods and the bell in the center of town had rung several times. Thinking about it later, Wendy Gunther realized that they should have anticipated something like this, because the animals had been acting strange the last couple of days: chickens had stopped laying eggs, goats had refused to give milk, dogs seemed to bark for no reason, and shags had restlessly paced around their corral. But no one had been that observant, and the livestock and pets didn't have the capacity to tell their masters what upset them.

It wasn't until she received the priority message from the *Alabama* that Wendy discovered that this was no mere earthquake. It was something far more serious. As acting mayor in Robert Lee's absence, the colony's precious satellite transceiver had been placed in her care; she'd left it switched on, awaiting word that the *Plymouth* had reached the ship and that orbital communications had been restored. She was still picking up broken crockery from the floor of her cabin and trying to soothe Susan's frazzled nerves when the unit beeped for the first time in several years.

Lee's transmission didn't last very long, but Wendy managed to save the photo images he sent down before the ship passed over the horizon. Suddenly, shattered plates and a hysterical child were the least of her concerns. Once she copied the images into her pad, she put on her parka and boots, then shinnied down the rope ladder from her treehouse and ran off to gather the members of the Town Council who'd remained in Defiance . . . and one more person, a recent arrival who knew much about these things.

So now Fred LaRoux was seated in front of the comp set up in the council office, studying a succession of high-orbit images captured by *Alabama's* onboard cameras. Save for the occasional whispered comment—"oh, boy," "uh-oh," "that's not good"—the geologist remained quiet until he ran through the series twice, sometimes backing up to zoom in on one frame or another, while the council members sat or stood around him, murmuring to each other as they gaped at the awesome views of Mt. Bonestell as seen from space.

Wendy finally lost patience. "So what's going on?" she asked, leaning across the table so that Fred couldn't ignore her any longer. "Are we in trouble?"

He sighed. "Good news first, or bad?" He didn't wait for her response. "Good news is that the prevailing winds are pushing the plume to the east, not the west. So we're not directly in the line of the ashfall . . . it's moving away from us, toward the Midland Channel."

"White Company's over there." Henry Johnson leaned heavily upon his walking stick, taking the weight off his wounded knee. "Is this going to affect their mission?"

Fred nodded. "When that ash comes down, it's going to clog up their hovercraft fans. . . ."

"But it's just ash. I don't see how . . ."

"This is rock ash, not wood ash. With an eruption of this severity . . . and believe me, this is severe . . . they're going to get several feet of what amounts to powdered stone. They'll be dead in the water if they don't get out of there as quick as they can." He glanced at Wendy. "Better fire a message to them as soon as possible, warn them about what's going to happen."

Wendy nodded, even though she knew it was hopeless. It would be another two hours before *Alabama* came within transmission range once more; until then, she'd be unable to bounce a signal to White Company. Just now, though, this was the least of their problems. "You said that's the good news. So what's the bad news?"

"Lava?" Kuniko Okada had been watching the comp screen with the same horrified fascination as the others.

Fred shook his head. "If this was a Hawaiian-type eruption, then we'd expect lava flows, yes, and even then I wouldn't be worried. Oh, maybe I'd be concerned, if my people hadn't come down here. . . ."

Fred LaRoux had been the mayor of Shady Grove, a small settlement in a lowland valley beneath Mt. Bonestell, eight hundred miles northeast of Defiance. Six weeks earlier, fearing an eruption, he'd evacuated the town's sixty residents and brought them down the Gillis Range to Defi-

ance. Since then, many of them had joined the Rigil Kent brigade; they were among the members of Red Company and Blue Company, poised for a final assault upon New Florida.

"But lava isn't a problem here," he continued, pointing to the dark-grey plume captured by *Alabama's* cameras. "See that? Instead of liquefied rock, what we're seeing here is vaporized lava, coming up from a magma chamber beneath the planet's crust, along with a lot of superheated gases."

"Then . . . so what?" Vonda Cayle stood behind Wendy, nonchalant about the whole thing. "If it's just smoke, then I don't know what we're supposed to be worrying about."

"You don't understand." Fred rubbed his eyelids between his fingertips. "Look, this is a major Plinean eruption. No, not just an eruption . . . an explosion. What probably happened is that a bubble of magma, under very high pressure, gradually rose through the planet's crust until it reached the surface, at which point it simply blew up." He clicked to another view of the volcano, one made from nearly directly overhead. "It's hard to tell, but I think it's a safe bet that the force of the explosion was roughly equivalent to that of a nuke. Probably took out the top of the mountain. That's what we felt down here."

Fred expanded the screen so that the plume appeared in close-up. "So that's not just smoke . . . that's ash, millions of tons of it. The heavier particles stay close to the ground and roll downhill in what we call a pyroclastic flow. Think of a tidal wave, but instead of water you've got ash, rock, even boulders, moving more than a hundred miles an hour, reaching temperatures as high as three hundred degrees. Anything in its path is either crushed or incinerated."

Wendy stared at the screen. Although most of the plume extended to the east, she noticed that smaller pyroclastic flows extended in all directions, including southwest toward Shady Grove. "Good thing you got your people out of there."

"Yeah, well . . . I had a feeling something like this was going to happen when we started feeling tremors a few months ago." Fred hesitated. "But your friend Zoltan . . . if he didn't leave . . ."

"Don't call him my friend." When she and Carlos had encountered Zoltan Shirow a couple of months ago, his madness had become complete; he now believed himself to be a god, with the sandthieves—the *chirreep*, he called them—worshipping him as such. She doubted that Zoltan had survived, but she couldn't help but feel remorse for the primitive creatures who might have probably lost their lives. And she'd also briefly seen one of his original followers.

She must have died, too. Glad that I didn't tell Ben Harlan about her. . . Wendy repressed a shudder, forced her thoughts back on track. "Mt. Bonestell is a long way from here. We shouldn't have to worry about that."

"You're right. The effects of pyroclastic flows will be localized . . . say, only about thirty or forty miles from the caldera. But that's not the worst of it." Fred clicked to another view of the eruption, this one farther east, showing the plume as it moved toward the eastern side of Midland. "The wind will carry the lighter particles across the rest of the island, all the way to the Midland channel, and then to Hammerhead, Highland, even

beyond. So you're going to see significant amounts of ash . . . up to two or three inches . . . falling across a broad area. Fortunately, we don't have any settlements out that way. . . ."

"But Ft. Lopez is going to get hit, won't it?" Henry smiled. "A little good news there."

"Well, yeah, it's pretty dangerous to fly aircraft through a volcanic plume. Ash will muck up rotors and jet intakes. But even if their gyros are grounded, they might be able to launch their shuttles, so long as they only use rocket boosters and don't overload them."

"White Company could be in trouble, though. The skimmer. . . ."

"Uh-huh. If they're in the path of the ashfall, then the skimmer's turbfans will be knocked out. Better hope they're smart enough to get out of there. But that's a minor detail. Look here. . . ."

Fred pulled up another image. This one showed Mt. Bonestell from a greater distance, as the *Alabama* passed over the Great Equatorial River south of Vulcan. The mountain itself was nearly invisible, but the plume could be easily seen as an enormous pillar rising high into the heavens, the sun catching its hazy outer reaches and tinting them luscious shades of orange and red. *A funeral pyre for a god*, Wendy thought, involuntarily recalling her earlier thoughts about Zoltan.

"Here's the problem," Fred went on. "The plume doesn't contain only ash, but also a mixture of gaseous compounds. Carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, chlorine, argon, fluorine, the works. They're going to hit the upper atmosphere forty or fifty miles up and be caught by the jet stream, and pretty soon they're going to spread across the entire planet. Even if this was a minor eruption, we might have something to worry about, but like I said, this isn't a hiccup."

"What are you getting at?" Again, Wendy found herself becoming impatient. "You say we're in trouble?"

"Wait a minute, all right?" Fred gave her a stern look. "We haven't been here long enough for us to study the geological history of this planet. All we can do is look at what's happened on Earth in the past and make an educated guess. That having been said . . ."

He let out his breath. "Look . . . about seventy-four thousand years ago, Mt. Toba in Sumatra underwent an eruption that put up to four hundred thousand megatons of dust and gas into the atmosphere. This caused the average global temperature to drop by somewhere between three and five degrees centigrade, with the temperature in certain regions dropping as much as fifteen degrees over the course of six years. Global cooling caused hard-freezes that killed off all tropical vegetation and knocked out at least 50 percent of the forests. No doubt quite a few animal species went extinct as a result."

"Oh, God..." Kuniko held a hand to her face.

"That's the worst-case scenario. Doesn't mean that it'll happen here. But . . ." Fred held up a hand. "When Mt. Laki in Iceland erupted in the late 1700s, it dumped about two thousand megatons of aerosols into the upper atmosphere, and dropped the average temperature in the northern hemisphere by one percent. The same thing happened again when Mt. Tambora blew in the early 1800s, and also with the eruption of Krakatau

later the same century. Global cooling leading to short summers, loss of vegetation, shorter growing seasons. . . ."

"And you think this could happen here," Wendy said.

"That could very well be the case, yes. The only question is the magnitude of the eruption. I don't have much to go by, but with any luck this isn't a Toba event . . . if that's the case, we're sunk, because the volcanic winter could last at least two Coyote years and we'll all die. But even if it's only on the scale of a Laki or a Tambora event, then we're still in trouble."

Wendy understood now. This was only the earliest part of spring on Coyote; the weather was still cool, but in a few weeks the rainy season would begin. Once that was over, the time would come to plant the first of several crops that would sustain them not only for the rest of the year, but also for the long winter months that lay ahead. But if their livestock starved, if they had no grain stockpiled, if next winter came around and there was insufficient food to keep everyone fed. . . .

"I think I see what you mean," she said softly. "Bad time for a revolution, isn't it?"

Fred nodded. "Uh-huh. Better hope it's not too late for peace talks."

0803—WHSS *Spirit of Social Collectivism Carried to the Stars*

As he gazed up at the ceiling of the command center, Fernando Baptiste came to the realization that he had no words for what he was seeing. During his long career as an officer of the Union Astronautica, he'd witnessed many impressive sights: the first light of dawn upon the summit of Olympus Mons, the transit of Galilean moons across the face of Jupiter, liquid methane raining down from the clouds of Titan. Yet none of these was as beautiful, nor as terrifying, as what was now displayed upon the dome of the bridge: a volcano of an alien world in full eruption, great clouds of pumice billowing forth to cover half a subcontinent.

Beautiful, yes . . . but also ominous. Coyote might be largely uninhabited, but nonetheless, there were thousands of people down there. Baptiste didn't need an extensive background in planetary science to know that an eruption of this magnitude would have severe consequences. Yet he was helpless to do anything about it that would matter. How could one contend with forces of such awesome power?

"Captain?" The officer on duty at the com station turned to him. "Receiving transmission from Ft. Lopez. The base commandant is online."

"Put him through, please." Baptiste touched a button on his armrest that elevated a flatscreen; a moment later, Bon Cortez's bearded face appeared. "Good morning, Lieutenant. I take it this isn't a social call."

"I only wish it were, sir. I expect you already know what's happened."

"I do indeed." Less than an hour ago a yeoman had come knocking on the door of his quarters, awakening him with an urgent request to report to the bridge. Since then the *Spirit* had completed an orbit of Coyote; now that the ship was once again above the planet's daylight side, he'd been able to view the eruption with his own eyes. "How's your situation?"

"It's not getting any better, sir, if that's what you're asking." Static fuzzed his voice; the screen wavered slightly, losing focus. *"We're beginning to receive ash from the volcano . . . not much, at least so far, but it's bound to get worse. We've also noticed a marked decrease in visibility."* He glanced to one side, murmuring to someone off-screen, then looked back again. *"We've got a camera outside. If you'd like to see. . ."*

"Yes, please." The com officer had been listening to the conversation, and didn't need to be told what the captain wanted. A broad window opened on a section of the ceiling. Across the command center, crewmen stopped what they were doing to gaze up at the dome, they could see what the men at Ft. Lopez were seeing.

It was as if a vast black curtain was slowly being drawn across the sky, quickly moving across the Midland Channel toward Hammerhead. In the foreground, Union Guardsmen stared up at the advancing cloud formation, while flecks of what looked like pink snow flashed past the camera; ash was already accumulating on the windshields of the gyros parked on the landing field nearby. It was still early morning on Hammerhead, yet it seemed as if a premature twilight was descending upon the island. And when it did . . .

"Lieutenant, I recommend that you move the gyros," Baptiste said. "They may not be able to fly under these conditions."

Cortez's face was still on his screen, but his image was breaking up. Same thing with the outside shot; lines raced across the view of the landing field. The ash cloud was causing electromagnetic interference. *"Sir? What did you say about the gyros? I don't understand. . ."*

"Get them out of there. Do you copy?"

"Yes, sir. But where do we. . .?"

His voice crackled, became incoherent. Baptiste could barely see him, and the outside view was almost lost as well. The cloud had moved between Hammerhead and the *Spirit*, he realized, and it was interfering with the uplink.

"Get them airborne!" he snapped. "I don't care where, just move 'em!"

Cortez responded with something that sounded like an affirmative, then the screen went dark. Looking up at the dome, Baptiste caught one last glimpse of the landing field—the gyros were still on the ground, it seemed as if a blizzard was descending upon them—and then even that image was lost.

"Loss of signal, sir," the com officer said.

"Do what you can to get it back." Baptiste settled back in his chair. "We can't afford to lose contact."

With luck, Cortez might have enough time to get some of the gyros in the air before they were all grounded. Yet even if he did, where would they go? Not to the west; Midland already lay beneath the cloud. Maybe north or south, toward Barren Isle or Highland, for what little good that would do; the aircraft would consume half their fuel just getting out from under the plume. And there were not even names for the wilderness areas that lay west beyond Vulcan, let alone reliable maps.

Once again, he realized the futility of the war. So much effort had been put into fighting the Midland colonies that further exploration of this

world had been neglected. Baptiste forced himself to calm down. Perhaps it wouldn't matter. Rigil Kent had been inactive for the last couple of months. It had been a long, tough winter, and the raids the Union had made upon Defiance and the other colonies had probably sapped their strength. This eruption would doubtless affect them as well, cause them to retrench even more.

If so, why did he have the disquieting feeling that he was wrong?

0834—North Creek, New Florida

Carlos gazed at the tiny screen of his pad. The unit was hardwired to his satphone; he could view the images of Mt. Bonestell that had been relayed from orbit. "I see what you're talking about," he said. "This changes everything, doesn't it?"

"I'm afraid it does." Lee's voice from the pad's speaker was tinny yet distinct. The skies above New Florida remained clear, and with *Alabama* once again directly overhead, the satphone's parabolic antenna had no trouble achieving an uplink. "I don't want to abort, but I'm ready to do so if you think we should."

Carlos glanced at Chris and Marie. They were sitting cross-legged across from him, beneath the shade of one of the blackwoods where Red Company had pitched camp. Everyone else dozed within their tents, save for a couple of men standing guard near the boats, which had either been pulled ashore or, in the case of the keelboats, covered with camouflage nets. Chris didn't say anything as he idly plucked at the grass, but Marie shook her head.

"I'd like to hear more," he said. "Any word from White Company?"

"We're still trying to make contact with them. The ash cloud's causing radio interference. Defiance tells us that the skimmer's engines would be clogged by ash, though, so we must assume that they're out of the picture. But their gyros probably won't be able to lift off either. If that's the case, Ft. Lopez is already out of commission . . . at least, that's what we think."

Carlos nodded. Once White Company knocked out the landing fields on Hammerhead, Red Company would move in on Liberty from the north and Blue Company would take Shuttlefield from the east. The three attacks were scheduled to occur simultaneously at 0600 the next morning; taking out the Union Guard's air superiority was vital to the operation's success. The ashfall might have done so already, but still . . .

"Sounds a little iffy, Captain. Are we sure Hammerhead is down?"

A short pause. "We don't know for sure," Lee replied after a moment. "We haven't seen anything take off from Hammerhead, but that doesn't mean they didn't launch their gyros before the cloud moved over them. They're probably just as confused as we are, so . . ."

"I see." Carlos absently kneaded his hands together. It had taken months to put this operation together, and now that they were so close to achieving their objective, nature had thrown a monkey wrench into the works. *Damn! If it had only erupted a couple of days later. . .*

"I say we go ahead." Chris lifted his head. "We've got everyone in place. If we abort now, we might not get another chance for a long time."

"He's right," Marie said. "We've come a long way already. . . ."

"Then we'll just go back the same way," Carlos said. "That's not the issue."

"Hell it ain't." Chris looked him straight in the eye. "C'mon, man, how much has it taken for us to get this far? Until now, they've had us by the short hairs. Now we've got them. You want to duck out now just because of bad weather?"

Carlos started to object, but stopped short. No one had been drafted; everyone here had volunteered because they wanted to be free, to live their lives without fear of Union Guard troops raiding their villages, to not work as forced labor upon projects created by the matriarch for the further industrial development of this world. Their own lives were at risk, but also in the balance were those of countless individuals—not only now, but for years to come. The future of Coyote itself rested upon the decisions he'd make that morning, that moment.

He took a deep breath. "Sir," he said, "I've decided . . . we've decided . . . to proceed."

A short silence, just long enough for him to wonder whether they had debated too long and *Alabama* had already passed beyond range. But then he heard Lee's voice once more: "*Glad to hear it. I think you're doing the right thing. And for your information, Blue Company concurs.*"

Carlos smiled. Of course, Lee would have been in contact with Clark Thompson. Blue Company was holding position on the Eastern Divide, waiting to march up the Swamp Road from Bridgeton to Shuttlefield. "Thank you, sir. Glad to know that Blue is with us."

"So am I." Again, a short pause. "*There's something else . . . I think we should consider advancing the timetable.*"

The suggestion took him almost as much by surprise as learning that Mt. Bonestell had erupted. "By how much?" he asked. And more importantly, he wondered without asking, why?

"Let me ask . . . how long do you think would it take for your team to reach Liberty?"

Carlos snapped his fingers, pointed to the rolled-up map they'd been using to lead the flotilla. Chris quickly laid it out across the ground, placing stones on its corners to keep it flat. Carlos gave it a brief study; from where they were now, they would have to travel about thirty miles southwest down North Creek until they reached the point where Sand Creek branched off, then another twenty-five miles to Liberty. Fifty-five miles. Yet they would be traveling downstream all the way, and with the water running high because of the snowmelt further north, they shouldn't have trouble with shoals or sandbars.

"If we start out this evening . . ." he began.

"I'm thinking much earlier than that. What if you left now?"

"Is he crazy?" Marie whispered. "We can't . . ."

Carlos shot her a look. "If we leave now, we could get there. . . ." He made a quick mental calculation. "Sometime tonight, shortly after sundown."

"Sure," Chris murmured. "And we'd get there too tired to fight."

Carlos quickly nodded as he held up a hand. "Captain, my people have been rowing all night. If we spend the next twelve hours or so on the river, they'll be half-dead by the time we reach Liberty."

Not only that, he suddenly realized, but they'd also be moving in broad daylight. If anyone aboard the Union starship above Coyote were to focus their telescopes down upon New Florida, then they'd be able to see Red Company heading their way. The advantage of surprise would be lost.

"I realize what I'm asking you to do," Lee said. "*Clark Thompson voiced the same concerns, and he has the same problem.*" Carlos glanced at the map again. He was right; Blue Company would have to travel by foot for almost forty miles before they reached the southern end of Sand Creek, then cross the river and hike another dozen or so miles until they reached Shuttlefield. "*There's a good reason for this. I've got an idea, one that may save a lot of lives. If it's going to work, though, I'm going to need to have Red and Blue teams within striking range of the colonies by the end of the day.*"

"So what's your plan?"

He didn't hear anything for a couple of seconds. "*I can't tell you that right now,*" Lee said at last, "*so I'm just going to ask you to trust me. Can you do that?*"

A leap of faith. That was what Lee was asking him to make. Chris had his face in his hands and Marie was slowly shaking her head, yet Carlos found himself remembering the past. Two hundred and forty-five years ago, when they were only children, their fathers had made a similar leap of faith when they'd joined the conspiracy to hijack the *Alabama* and take it to 47 Ursae Majoris. And four Coyote years ago, after the first Union ship had unexpectedly arrived, Lee had trusted him to lead the original colonists from New Florida into the Midland wilderness. Once again, it came down to a matter of trust. And again the future was at stake.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I can."

"*I won't keep you then. You've got a lot to do. We're remaining aboard Alabama, so you'll be able to reach us again in another couple of hours. But do so only if you have to.*"

Back to radio silence. "I understand, sir."

"*Thank you. Good luck. Crimson Tide over and out.*"

"Good luck to you, too. Red Company out." He signed off, then disconnected the satphone from his pad.

Marie regarded him with disbelief. "Wow, that was easy, wasn't it? And he didn't even thank us. . . ."

"He's grateful. Believe me." Carlos folded the satphone's antenna, then stood up. "You heard him. We're on a new schedule. Go wake up the others, tell them to break camp and load up. We're shipping out."

His sister started to say something else, but one look at his face told her that it wasn't the right time. Heaving an expansive sigh, she stood up and marched away. Chris slowly stretched his arms. "I think I'd mind a lot less if I knew the reason why."

"He knows what he's doing. And like you said, we may not get another chance." Carlos forced a smile. "Look at it this way. If everything works out, then you get to see Luisa again a little earlier than you expected."

"Now that you put it that way. . . ." Chris heaved himself to his feet, then walked away clapping his hands as he whistled sharply. "Okay, people, wake up! Time to ride!"

0902—URSS *Alabama*

"Crimson Tide to White Company. Please respond, over." Lee listened for a moment, but heard nothing through his headset except carrier-wave static. "White Company, this is Crimson Tide. Do you copy? Over."

"Give up, Robert. We're not getting anywhere." Dana pointed to one of the screens above the com panel. "Transmitter's working fine, and we've got a good fix on where they should be. We just can't break through all that. . . ."

"I know, I know." One more try, just for the hell of it. "*Alabama* . . . I mean, Crimson Tide to White Company. If you copy, boost your gain. Repeat, boost your gain and respond. Over." He counted to ten, then finally surrendered to the inevitable. "Feels almost like they can hear us, but . . ."

"If they could answer, we would have known by now." She unfastened her seat belt, then floated out of her chair and pulled herself along the ceiling rail until she was next to him. "I'm sure they're fine," she added, putting a hand on his shoulder. "They just can't talk to us, that's all."

Lee absently took her hand as he gazed out the porthole. Once again, *Alabama's* equatorial orbit was taking it over the Midland Channel. Indeed, they were passing directly over Hammerhead, yet the only way they had of knowing this was the ground-track displayed on the nav station's flatscreens. The terrain itself was rendered invisible beneath the volcanic plume that covered everything between Mt. Bonestell and Mt. Pesek. Even from this distance, they could see the tiny sparks of St. Elmo's fire that roiled within the thick clouds. Short-range radios on the ground might be able to penetrate the electromagnetic interference, but from space . . .

"I guess . . . I hope you're right." If Fred LaRoux was correct, then White Company was immobilized. If that was the case, they could still clear enough ash from the skimmer's fans for them to restart the engines and retreat back down the channel. If worst came to worst, they could always abandon the missile carrier and make their way on foot across Midland until they reached Defiance.

Nonetheless, White Company's mission was a key part of the operation. Even if Ft. Lopez's gyros were grounded, there was no guarantee that military shuttles couldn't be launched. And with several hundred guardsmen garrisoned on Hammerhead, the Union still had the ability to repel Red Company and Blue Company as they moved in on New Florida.

Lee shut his eyes. Five hundred years ago, his ancestor must have faced these same choices. Yet even at Gettysburg, all General Lee had lost was a battle; the Confederacy might have perished, but America itself survived. The stakes for which he was fighting were far higher: freedom not just for a country, but for an entire world. And what he intended to do

now was something his many time great-grandfather would have never imagined. . . .

"Robert? Robert, are you. . . ?"

"I'm fine. Just thinking, that's all." He opened his eyes, gave her a tired smile. "Better get to work. We've got a lot to do before the next orbit."

"Sure." Dana released his hand, but she lingered by his side. "You didn't tell Carlos what you mean to do. Or Clark either."

He shook his head. "They might be caught. If so, I don't want to risk either of them telling. . . ."

"You know them better than that."

He couldn't fool her, and he should have known better than to try. "It's better that that they don't know," he said quietly. "If anything goes wrong. . . ."

"Then let's make sure we don't screw up." Dana grasped the handrail, started to pull herself away. "So what do you want me to do first? Take the helm, or. . . ?"

"I'll handle navigation. You go prime the main engine." He checked his watch. "Another hour and forty-five minutes before we're in range of Liberty. Move fast." He started to unbuckle his seat belt, then he snapped his fingers. "And we'd better tell. . . ."

"Kim. I know. She's going to love this." Dana grinned at him. "Y'know, I bet she thinks we've been fooling around up here."

"Believe me, I wish we were."

1146—Liberty, New Florida

Almost noon, and the town was going about its daily routine. A pair of shags led by a drover pulled a cart loaded with manure down Main Street, their hooves splashing through muddy potholes as they headed for the farm fields outside town. A couple of women walked past on the plank sidewalk, carefully avoiding eye-contact with a handful of off-duty guardsmen lounging on a bench outside their barracks. Across the road, someone washed the front windows of his cabin. Just another day, much like any other day in early spring.

Nonetheless, as she watched all this from the front steps of the community hall, the Matriarch Luisa Hernandez had a certain sense of foreboding. With her bodyguard standing nearby, she should have felt safe, and yet she found herself gazing up at the sky. It remained clear, the bright midday sun promising a warm afternoon, but she'd seen the images of Midland relayed from the *Spirit*, and had listened to Capt. Baptiste's report of the eruption. Mt. Bonestell was a long way from there, and the winds were carrying the plume from its eruption away from New Florida.

On the other hand, contact with Hammerhead had been lost earlier that morning. Apparently the ash-cloud was interfering with the satellite relay. She told herself that it was little more than an aberration. A temporary inconvenience, nothing to be worried about; her people were already working to reestablish communications with Ft. Lopez through other means. But still. . . .

In the three and a half years—almost eleven Earth years; had it really been that long?—since she'd arrived on Coyote, nothing had gone the way she'd expected. It should have been a straightforward task: assume control of the colony established by the *Alabama*, institute a collectivist system of government, put the second wave of settlers to work at developing local resources, and ultimately transform this world into a new Earth. She'd anticipated difficulties, of course—this was a frontier; there were bound to be hardships—but nothing that she and the Guard shouldn't have been able to handle.

Yet it hadn't gone that way. The original colonists had not only refused to cooperate, but had also gone so far as to flee to Midland, leaving behind little more than a collection of log cabins stripped to the bare walls. The more recent settlers, those either selected by lottery or able to bribe their way aboard Union starships, had gradually turned against her; Shuttlefield had become a ghetto, and those who'd left before she barred emigration had joined forces with the resistance movement on Midland. Her effort to build a bridge across the East Channel had ended in disaster when its own architect had collaborated with Rigil Kent in its sabotage. And although she'd established a military base on Hammerhead and given the Guard the task of seeking out the *Alabama* party's hidden settlement, the recent raid upon Defiance had been repelled, at the cost of many lives and some irreplaceable equipment.

So now, after all these long seasons, she found herself in control not of a world, as she had dreamed, but instead of little more than an island. And only marginal control, at that; she'd shifted most of the Guard to Hammerhead, leaving behind just a small garrison to defend New Florida. It was a risky move, but she was convinced that the key to victory was taking an offensive stance; rooting out the Rigil Kent movement had become her top priority.

In a few short weeks, she'd take the battle to them. The locations of the major settlements on Midland had been determined by Union patrols. Although the Defiance raid had been unsuccessful, it had helped her gauge its defensive capability. There were over four hundred guardsmen on Hammerhead now, along with gyros, armed skimmers, and military shuttles. Once the rainy season had come and gone and the creeks resumed their normal levels, she'd issue orders to attack. There would be no quarter asked and none given; by the end of spring, Coyote would belong to her.

But now. . . .

A volcano erupts, and suddenly her forces on Hammerhead are rendered incommunicado. Luisa wrapped her arms around herself, drawing her cape a little closer despite the warmth of the day, and stared bravely at the calm blue sky. A minor setback, that was all. A slight delay in her plans. She'd faced defeat before, and had survived. This, too, would pass. . . .

The door behind her swung open. "Matriarch . . ." an electronic voice began.

"I hope you're going to tell me you've reached Ft. Lopez," she said, not bothering to look around.

Heavy footsteps upon the wooden boards, then a tall figure cloaked in

black moved beside her. "We have indeed, ma'am, but there's something else you should . . ."

"Ft. Lopez. Tell me what you've learned."

Luisa couldn't help being impatient with Gregor Hull; he reminded her too strongly of his predecessor. Manuel Castro had accompanied her aboard the *Glorious Destiny*, and he had served as the colony's lieutenant governor. No, more than that; when he'd disappeared the previous autumn during the raid upon Thompson's Ferry—although his body was never found, she was certain that he was dead—she had lost her closest confidante. As another mechanistic posthuman, Savant Hull was physically identical to Savant Castro, but although he'd assumed Manny's role, he could never replace him. Indeed, his very presence was an insult to Castro's memory.

The savant hesitated. "As you wish," he said after a moment. "Satellite communications with the base are still impossible, but one gyro managed to escape."

"Only one?" Luisa looked at him sharply. "What about the others?"

"Two more lifted off. One attempted to fly through the ash cloud, but it lost power and crashed in the Midland Channel. The other reported engine trouble and was forced to turn back. It was able to land safely, and none of its crew were . . ."

"Get on with it."

"The third got away, but only because its pilot broke formation. It touched down on the southeastern coast of Midland, where its pilot was able to uplink with the *Spirit* while maintaining short-wave radio contact with Ft. Lopez."

The Matriarch let out her breath. One gyro out of twenty. If only the ground crews had acted more quickly on Baptiste's orders . . . "I can imagine the rest. Lt. Cortez has grounded the rest of the squadron."

"Yes, ma'am, he has. He doesn't wish to risk losing any more aircraft. There's already four inches of ash upon the landing field. . . ."

"No excuse."

"Matriarch, this isn't snow. This is volcanic ash. It doesn't melt. Two military shuttles are being prepared to lift troops and equipment to a safe location, but it may take some time before they're flightworthy. Even then, it won't be safe for them to carry more than half their usual payload, because . . ."

"I understand." Luisa disliked being lectured, and the savant sounded as if he were speaking to a child. "Tell them to do the best they can, but I want Ft. Lopez to be ready to resume operations as soon as possible. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, ma'am. Robert Lee wishes to speak to you."

For a few seconds, the matriarch didn't comprehend what Savant Hull had just said. She watched the man across the road cleaning his cabin windows, admiring the diligence he exercised soaping and rinsing every single pane. From somewhere not far away, she heard children playing softball in a field that hadn't yet been planted with the first spring crops. And suddenly, for only the second time in all these years, the man who had eluded her for so long wanted to parley with her.

"Now?" she asked. "Is he . . . ? I mean, do you have him online now?"

"Yes, Matriarch. His transmission is being received via satphone. I'm patched into our system, and I can relay it to you. If you wish me to provide translation. . . ."

"That won't be necessary. Put him through."

As a pastime, she'd studied English during the last few years; she partially blamed her lack of understanding of the older form of Anglo for her inability to negotiate with Lee when she'd first met him. She sat down on the steps, then raised her right hand to push aside her hair and prod her jaw, activating the subcutaneous implant beneath her skin. Savant Hull knew how to open the private channel to her; a few moments passed while he established linkage between her, him, and Liberty's satellite transceiver. There was a double-beep within her inner ear, then a faint hiss.

"Captain Lee?" she asked.

"*Matriarch Hernandez.*" The voice was faint, yet unmistakable. "*You've kept me waiting.*"

"My apologies, Captain. I didn't realize. . . ." Luisa stopped herself. She was the one in charge here, not him. "You have something you wish to discuss?"

"Yes, I do. I assume you've already learned about the eruption of Mt. Bonestell."

"I've been informed, yes." She glanced up at Savant Hull. "Quite an event. I trust none of your people are in immediate danger."

"At least for the time being, no. Thank you for your concern." A brief pause. "*It's come to my attention that this may have long-term consequences, ones which you may not be aware of. I've been reliably informed that the . . .*"

"Captain, would you hold a moment, please?" She prodded her implant, breaking the connection, then turned to Hull. "You say you're receiving this as a satellite transmission?"

"Yes, ma'am. Obviously he's been able to restore *Alabama's* orbital communications system."

Which meant that, if Lee wasn't in Defiance, then he was probably aboard the *Alabama*. That wasn't a surprise; although the original colonists had left behind one of their shuttles when they had fled Liberty, they had taken the other. Yet why would Lee have returned to his ship? Something was odd here. . . .

No time to worry about that now. She reopened the channel. "Sorry to keep you waiting. One of my aides wanted to speak with me."

"*They're probably wondering how I'm able to contact you. The truth is, I'm aboard the Alabama. We came up here to restore our com network, so that our settlements could talk to one another again.*"

His admission was unexpected, and caught her by surprise. "I appreciate your candor, Captain. I regret having to isolate your settlements, but the terrorist actions of Rigil Kent made it necessary for us to take such measures."

Another pause. "*Matriarch Hernandez, we can debate the reasons for our conflict another time. This isn't why I've contacted you. You just ex-*

pressed appreciation for my truthfulness. Are you willing to accept that I may tell you the truth about other issues?"

"I'm listening."

"I've been told by one of my people . . . Dr. Frederic LaRoux, you may know him . . . that Mt. Bonestell poses a grave threat to everyone on this planet. It's releasing acidic gases into the upper atmosphere that will cause the average global temperature to drop by as much as five degrees centigrade. This will probably . . . no, very likely . . . result in climate changes that will drastically affect crop production over the course of the coming year."

The Matriarch smiled as she heard this. "I'm out in front of the community hall. The sky is clear and the temperature is very pleasant. Mt. Bonestell is on your side of the world. If it erupts, that's your problem."

"Don't fool yourself, Matriarch. It's your problem, too. You may not be able to see the effects now, or tomorrow or even next week, but it'll affect you as well. Much the same thing happened on Earth in the past, and our people have little doubt that it's about to happen here, too. If we lose the summer crops, then we'll suffer drastic food shortages, and you should know by now how much we depend upon agriculture to carry us through the winter months."

She frowned. He had a point, whether she liked it or not. Despite her best efforts to increase crop production, New Florida depended upon six months of warm weather in order to grow enough food to stock the warehouses for the long, harsh months of Coyote's winter. The swamplers knew how to hibernate within ball plants, but humans didn't have that option. "Assuming that your people are correct," she asked, "what do you suggest we do about it?"

"Matriarch, your people and mine have been fighting for over three years. As I said, the reasons are beside the point." Lee paused. "I think the time has come for us to seek a truce. We can't afford to engage in war while we're trying to stay alive."

Luisa felt her pulse quicken. She stood up, walked down the steps, Savant Hull and her bodyguard following close behind. "You're willing to surrender?"

"No. Not a surrender. Armistice. A cessation of hostilities."

She clasped a hand over her mouth. After all this, the man was suggesting peace talks! She didn't know whether to laugh out loud or scream with victory. "I think. . ." She took a deep breath, hoped that she wasn't betraying her emotions. "I think we should discuss this further. What do you suggest?"

For an instant, she thought she heard another voice in the background, as if someone else aboard the *Alabama* was arguing with him. Then Lee returned. "I'm prepared to meet with you in Liberty, face to face, provided I can come under flag of truce. Are you willing to do that?"

"Certainly. Of course." This was getting better all the time; she found herself dancing from one foot to another. "Your shuttle will bring you here?"

"Yes. We can arrive at . . ." A few seconds passed. "1900 hours, by your time. We'll touch down in the landing field just outside Liberty."

The center of Shuttlefield. Perfect. "Very good, Captain Lee. I look forward to seeing you again."

"Same here, Matriarch. I hope our talks will be fruitful. Alabama out."

She heard a buzz within her ear, signaling that the satphone link had been broken. Luisa heaved a deep sigh. "I've got him," she said quietly, unable to keep the smile from her face. "I've finally got him."

"If you say so." As always, the savant registered no emotion. "But don't you think. . . ?"

"I think very well, thank you." She turned away, allowing her bodyguard to open the front door of the community hall for her. In only a few hours, her enemy would walk into her hands, voluntarily and of his own free will. "Come now. We need to prepare for his arrival."

He must be desperate. All the better. The negotiations would be very short, and entirely on her terms.

1214—URSS *Alabama*

Lee switched off, then slowly let out his breath as he settled back in his chair. For a few moments he gazed out the window, watching Midland as it passed below once more. *Alabama* was in its third orbit since they had come aboard; the titanic column of ash rising from Mt. Bonestell was clearly visible, and, if anything, it had become larger since the last time he'd seen it.

He hoped that Fred LaRoux was overstating the consequences of the eruption, but he didn't think so; already the thin gauze of the upper atmosphere above the limb of the planet had subtly changed color from light blue to reddish-brown.

"You know what she's going to do, don't you?" Dana floated upside down above the engineering station, consulting a pad she'd clipped to a panel while she carefully entered a new program into the keypad. "She thinks you're going to give up, and when she finds out you're not, she's going to take you hostage."

"That thought occurred to me, yes." He tapped his headset mike. "Kim, how's it going down there?"

"I've got re-entry plotted," she replied, *"but if we're going to touch down by 1900, we're going to have to depart by 1300 at the latest. Sorry to rush you, but we've got a tight window."*

"Understood." Lee glanced over at Dana; she briefly nodded and gave him a thumbs-up. "Shovel some more coal into the engines, we'll be there as soon as we can." He clicked off, then unbuckled the seat belt and pushed himself toward the engineering station. "I have no doubt whatsoever that she'll try to take full advantage of the situation. She's the kind of person who sees everything in terms of power."

"And you think you can deal with someone like that." Not a question, but a statement.

"I think so." He grasped a ceiling rail to brake himself. "I was once married to someone who thought that way."

Dana glanced away from the comp screen. "Sorry," she murmured, embarrassed by what she'd said. "I forgot."

"Don't worry about it." It had been many years—almost 245, in fact—since the last time any of them had seen Elise Rochelle Lee, the daughter of a United Republic of America senator, once his wife before . . . Lee shook his head. He seldom thought of Elise any more, and when he did his memories were bitter. "Let's just say that I've had practice, and leave it at that."

Dana said nothing, but her eyes expressed sympathy before she returned to her work. Lee watched as she tapped a few more keys, double-checked what was on the screen against the datapad's display, then loaded the program into the AI. "All right, we're golden. Main engine's back online and I've preset the ignition sequence for 1930 on the nose. All we have to do now is set the trajectory and engage the autopilot. . . ."

"I've already worked out the trajectory." Lee reached for the pad. "Want me to insert the final numbers?"

"Let me handle it. I've got 'em in my head. Excuse me . . ." Dana unclipped the pad, then performed a graceful somersault that sent her in the direction of the helm station. "If you want to do something, you can disengage the command lock-out on the autopilot. I know your code, but it'll save me a minute. Oh, and yeah, Kim might appreciate it if you opened the cradle."

"Got it." Lee returned to his chair. Not bothering to seat himself again, he pulled up the lapboard while hovering overhead, then typed in the six-digit string that would allow Dana to enter a new course into the navigation subsystem. Once that was done, he pushed the buttons that would reopen the shuttle cradle and allow *Plymouth* to undock from the ship.

The instruments made their discordant music of random beeps and boops, and for a moment it almost seemed as if the ship were alive again. Lee let his gaze roam across the command center. He had trouble remembering Elise's face, but it was all too easy for him to recall when this place had been filled with his crew, shouting orders to one another in those last minutes before *Alabama* launched from Earth orbit. Now it was just him and his chief engineer, preparing their ship for one last journey. . . .

"Done and done." Dana turned away from the helm, pulled herself along the rails toward him. "We're on the clock now. Better get below before Kim throws a fit."

"Yeah. Sure." Lee started to reach down, intending to close the porthole shutters, then realized that it was pointless. He withdrew his hand . . . and then, on impulse, he hit the switch anyway.

"Why did you do that?" Dana watched the shutters slowly descend upon the windows, blocking out the sunlight and casting the compartment into darkness once more. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does." It was hard to explain, but he felt like it was the right thing to do. Like offering a blindfold to a man being marched before a firing squad. He turned toward the hatch. "Come on," he said, feeling a dryness in his throat, "let's go before I change my mind."

1301—WHSS *Spirit of Social Collectivism Carried to the Stars*

“**T**here it is,” Baptiste said. “Increase magnification, please.”

He watched as the image displayed on the ceiling changed. What had once been a tiny sliver of reflected light almost lost among the stars suddenly became a recognizable shape: the *Alabama*, picked up by the *Spirit*’s navigation telescope.

The other ship was nearly two thousand miles away, gliding just above the limb of the planet. Over the last few months, his crew had become used to spotting the derelict every now and then; its equatorial orbit was higher than the *Spirit*’s, though, and on a slightly different plane, and so the vessel would disappear beyond the horizon after each brief encounter. Only once had anyone gone aboard the *Alabama*, and then just to disable its communication system. Baptiste had always meant to pay it a visit, if only out of curiosity—after all, it was an historic artifact—but he had never found the time nor the opportunity, and after awhile its presence faded to the back of his mind.

Once again, it occupied his full attention. As he watched, a tiny wedge-shaped form detached itself from the *Alabama*’s midsection. A brief flare of light, then it slowly fell away from the ship, beginning a long descent toward the planet below.

“That must be the shuttle,” the com officer said unnecessarily. “I should be able to locate its radio frequency, sir. Do you wish me to hail it?”

“Negative.” The last thing Baptiste wanted its crew to know was that it was being observed. “Reopen the channel to Liberty, please.” He waited until he heard the double-beep within his ear, then prodded his jaw. “You’re correct, Matriarch. There was someone aboard the *Alabama*.”

“Was, or is?”

“Was. Past tense. We just saw a shuttle depart.” He peered more closely at the *Alabama*. No light within its portholes. “From what I can tell, its docking cradles are empty. I doubt there’s anyone aboard.”

“I see. . . .” A brief pause. “*All the same, I’d like to be certain. Can you send someone over there to check?*”

“Just a moment.” Baptiste glanced at the navigator. She tapped a couple of keys, then pointed at her screen. He punched up her console display on his private screen, quickly studied the orbital tracks of both ships. “I can do so, but it’ll take some time for a skiff to make rendezvous. Six hours at least, and only if we launch at once.”

“*Please do so, Captain. At the very least, I’d like to have their satphone capability taken down again.*”

“Yes, ma’am.” He didn’t like Luisa Hernandez very much; she was arrogant, her methods crude and imperialistic, and once already they’d crossed swords. Although he was in charge of military operations, she was the colonial governor, and in certain matters her authority superseded his. It was her original order to deny orbital communications to the resistance movement, and in that regard she had the final say. “I’ll send a team over right away. If that’s all. . . .”

“*It isn’t. I want you to come down here and join me.*”

Several people looked up as she said this. They were patched in to their conversation, as normal for space-to-ground communications. It was no secret among the crew that the captain detested the matriarch, and that he'd returned to the ship, on the pretext of maintaining command discipline, in order to avoid having personal contact with her. Baptiste deliberately turned his back on them. "Do you think that's necessary, ma'am?"

"Captain, may I remind you that Robert Lee is aboard that shuttle, and that he himself has requested this meeting? If he's planning to surrender. . ."

"You said earlier that he requested an armistice."

"Only a choice of words. This situation obviously poses a threat that he can't handle. Or perhaps he's been considering giving up for a while, and just sees this as a way out. Either way, he wants to bring hostilities to an end. As commander of Union Guard operations, your presence here is crucial."

Baptiste bit his lower lip. She had him there. In breaking off her operation earlier to capture Rigil Kent, he'd asserted his rank as the most senior Union Astronautica officer on Coyote. The role of being a commander of an occupational force wasn't comfortable for him, though, and since then he'd been happy to let the matriarch do as she would with the Union Guard reinforcements he'd brought from Earth.

He knew he couldn't wash his hands of the matter any longer. And, he had to admit to himself, he was curious as to why Lee would make such a sudden gesture toward peace. And the timing . . . there was something odd about the timing. . . .

"Yes, Matriarch. I'll be there as soon as possible."

"Very good, Captain. I'm looking forward to . . ."

"Thank you, Matriarch. *Spirit* out." He impatiently cut the comlink, then stood up from his chair. "Prepare a shuttle for me, please," he said, turning to the senior watch officer standing nearby, "and tell the pilot I want a fast descent to Liberty." With luck, he might be able to beat Lee's shuttle to the ground. "And detail an inspection crew to the *Alabama*," he added as he headed for the lift. "Tell them to burn extra fuel if they have to, but I want them aboard as soon as possible."

The watch officer was already issuing orders as the lift doors closed behind Baptiste. His hand wavered in front of the panel as he briefly considered stopping by his cabin to exchange his duty fatigues for a black dress uniform. If this was a disarmament conference, then perhaps he should be suitably attired for the occasion.

Then he thought better of it, and pushed the button for the shuttle deck. Doing so would only waste time. Besides, he was reluctant to do anything that might make the matriarch look good.

And he doubted that Robert E. Lee would care very much about his appearance.

1521—Sand Creek, New Florida

Sand Creek split off from North Creek at the tip of a broad peninsula, where it took its own course to the southeast, passing grassy savannahs

dotted by isolated groves of faux-birch and blackwood. One after another, the flotilla turned to the left, the keelboats and pirogues trimming their sails to catch the late afternoon wind, the canoes keeping to the center of the narrow river in order to ride the current. The water level remained high, so no one ran aground on the narrow sandbars that lay submerged beneath the surface.

Peering back over his shoulder, Carlos watched as the last of the boats made the turn, making sure that no one continued down North Creek by accident. He and Chris had switched places a few hours ago; now he sat in the stern, the better to keep track of everyone. They had long since given up trying to remain in the lead. The pirogues and keelboats had the advantage of speed, and it made little sense to try to outrace them, so they contented themselves with remaining near the rear of the flotilla. Once they got closer to Liberty, he and Chris would paddle back to the front.

For a while, though, the current was pulling them along. Carlos laid his paddle across the gunnels, giving his arms a moment to rest. His back ached and his biceps felt like coils of lead cable; arching his spine, he felt vertebrae gently crack, and he shook his arms in an effort to loosen his muscles. Never before in his life had he pushed himself so hard. Even when he'd made his solo journey down the Great Equatorial River, he hadn't attempted to travel such a long a distance in so short a time. And he didn't want to think about how far they still had to go.

"Got some water?" Chris was hunched in the bow seat. Like Carlos, he'd pulled off his shirt once the day had become warm; the sun had reddened his shoulders, and sweat plastered his hair against the back of his neck. He was just as tired, but he continued to plunge the blade of his paddle into the brown water, mindless of the fact that Carlos had stopped paddling.

"No problem." Carlos reached forward, pulled aside his jacket to find the catskin flask. It was little more than a quarter-full, and although he was tempted to take a drink himself, he tossed it forward. "Take a breather. Let the river do the work."

"I hear you." Chris pulled up his paddle, then reached back to find the flask. Unstopping it, he tilted back his head and upended the flask, letting some of the water fall across his face. Carlos said nothing; they could always beg some more drinking water from one of the larger boats. "What a job, man. What a job."

"Just a few more miles to go. We're halfway there. It'll soon be over."

This was a half-lie, and they both knew it. They had passed the halfway point shortly before they entered Sand Creek, but more than a few miles lay between them and Liberty. They had made good time, and the current was with them, but the journey was far from over. Soon enough, they'd have to put down paddles and pick up their guns, and face dozens of Union Guard soldiers who'd had little more to do all day than clean their weapons.

Whatever Lee was planning, Carlos hoped it was the right thing, because Red Company was going to arrive dead on its feet. *Alabama* would be passing over again soon; he was tempted to pick up the satphone and bounce a signal to Blue Company, just to see how it was doing, but he and

Clark Thompson had agreed to maintain radio silence unless absolutely necessary until the two teams were within sight of their respective targets.

"Yeah, well, the sooner, the . . ." Chris's voice abruptly dropped to a whisper. "Hey, look over there."

Carlos raised his head, peered toward the riverbank to their right. At first he didn't see anything—sourgrass as high as his chest, spider bush snarled along the edge of the water, a few trees in the background—and then something moved, and he saw a boid looking straight at him.

No . . . not just one boid, but two . . . three . . . four. A hunting pack. Their dun-colored feathers rendered them nearly invisible against the tall grass that surrounded them, yet their enormous parrot-like beaks were easily discernible. Four avians, the smallest his own height, their murderous gaze locked upon them. They stood together on the creek bank, less than a dozen yards away. And the shallows wouldn't stop them from attacking, not with prey so close at hand.

It had been years since the last time he'd seen a boid at such close range; they didn't like the high country of Midland, and had learned to avoid human settlements. Years ago, one of these creatures had killed his parents, and another had come close to killing him as well; its skull used to hang from the wall of his treehouse, until Susan complained that it gave her nightmares and Wendy had made him take it down.

Keeping his eye on them, Carlos slowly bent forward, searching for his rifle. Yet the boids remained where they were. They stood still, silently watching as the canoe drifted past. It wasn't until Chris picked up his paddle and carefully moved them farther away from shore that Carlos relaxed. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw the boids disappear back into the tall grass.

"I'll be damned," he murmured. "They didn't attack." He looked at Chris. "That close, and they didn't attack."

"No, they didn't. And you know why?" He grinned. "They're scared of us."

All at once, the exhaustion left him. There was no more doubt, no more need for rest. Taking a deep breath, he picked up his paddle once more.

"We're going to win," Carlos said very quietly, more to himself than to Chris. "We're going to win this thing."

1859—Shuttlefield, New Florida

Plymouth came out of the setting sun, making a low, sweeping turn to the west that shed the rest of its velocity. In the last few seconds before it descended upon the landing field, Lee caught a brief glimpse of the shanty town that surrounded the place where this same craft—once named the *Jesse Helms* before Tom Shapiro had rechristened it—had made the first landing upon Coyote.

Good grief, he thought, his eyes widening as he gazed upon the sprawl of shacks, hovels, and tents, *they've actually got people living here?* Then

the jets kicked up dust around the cockpit and the wheels touched down, and Kim reached forward to pull back the throttles and kill the engines.

"All right, we're here," she murmured. "What do you want me to do now?"

"Stay put." Lee unfastened his seat harness. "Raise the gangway after I'm gone and shut the hatch . . . just in case."

"Right. Just in case. Captain . . ."

"Open the belly hatch and lower the ramp, please." He avoided looking at her as he stood up. "If it doesn't work out . . . well, you'll know if it doesn't. Get off the ground and head back to Defiance." She started to object, but he continued. "Don't argue with me. You have your orders."

"Aye, sir." She reached to the center console and toggled a few switches; there was a thump beneath the deck as the hatch opened and the gangway began to descend. "Good luck," she added. "I hope everything works out."

"Thanks. So do I." Lee pulled on his jacket, then left the cockpit. As he expected, Dana was waiting for him in the passenger compartment; she'd already opened the inner hatch, and a cool breeze was drifting in. She was putting on her serape, but he shook his head. "Sorry, no. You're staying here with . . ."

"Like hell. Where you go, I . . ."

"No, you're not." He planted his hands on her shoulders, backed her into the nearest seat. "Look, you said it yourself . . . there's a good chance I could be taken hostage. If they get me, that's fine, but if they get both of us, then they can use you to make me do whatever they want. You're not going to be able to help me very much, so you're staying here."

Tears glistened at the corners of her eyes. "Damn it, Robert," she said softly, "do you have to be so . . . so logical all the time?"

He smiled down at her. "Sorry. Can't help myself." He leaned down to kiss her; she wrapped her arms around his neck, and for a few moments they held each other. "Now go forward and keep Kim company," he said as he released her and stood up. "And close the hatch after I'm gone."

"Yeah. Sure." She hesitated. "Robert, I . . ."

"Me, too." And then he turned and, ducking his head slightly, headed down the gangway.

Twilight was settling upon the landing field, the evening wind picking up as Bear began to rise to the east. A large crowd of Shuttlefield residents, kept at a distance by a ring of armed guardsmen, had gathered around the *Plymouth*; he heard his name being murmured in tones of astonishment as he marched down the ramp, and even the two soldiers waiting to meet him regarded him with awe. Here was Robert E. Lee, the commanding officer of the *Alabama*, a figure of history and legend long before they were born. Lee couldn't help but smile; he would probably have the same reaction if Christopher Columbus suddenly landed in a spaceship.

Enough of this. He turned to the nearest guardsman. "I'm here to meet with Matriarch Hernandez," he said, speaking in the pidgin Anglo he'd managed to pick up over the past few years. "Can you take me to her, please?"

"I . . . I . . ." The soldier was speechless, and for a moment Lee thought he'd drop his gun and ask for an autograph. "Yes, of course, but we . . . I mean . . ."

"Captain Lee?" From behind the two guardsmen, another figure stepped forward. Wearing a dark blue jumpsuit that bore the insignia of the Union Astronautica, he carried an air of authority that nonetheless was unimpressed with fame. "Permit me to introduce myself," he said, addressing him in flawless English as he extended his hand. "I'm Captain Fernando Baptiste, commanding officer of the *Spirit of Social Collectivism Carried to the Stars*."

The captain of the starship that had brought the Union Guard reinforcements to Ft. Lopez. "Pleased to meet you, Captain Baptiste," he said, formally shaking his hand, "but I had rather expected the matriarch to be here herself."

"My apologies, Captain. She's waiting for you in Liberty, at the community hall. I was sent to escort you to . . ."

They were interrupted by the sound of the gangway being retracted. Lee turned to watch the ramp fold against the *Plymouth's* underside. "You're a prudent man, Captain," Baptiste said quietly as the belly hatch slammed shut. "It might not have occurred to me to take such precautions."

Lee said nothing as he studied Baptiste from the corner of his eye. He wore the uniform of the enemy, but Lee sensed no malice in the man; indeed, he had the strong feeling that he was in the presence of a kindred soul. An adversary, perhaps, but possibly a reluctant one. He noted the satchel clipped to Baptiste's belt, and a new thought occurred to him. . . .

"I've learned to be careful," he said. "Especially when dealing with the matriarch."

"Yes . . . of course." Turning aside, Baptiste beckoned in the direction of Liberty. "If you'll follow me, please?"

They set out on foot, marching side by side along the long, muddy road that led from the edge of Shuttlefield across fallow farm fields toward Liberty. Guardsmen formed a protective ring around them, but the crowd continued to follow, peering through the soldiers, occasionally shouting Lee's name. At one point his left foot found a pothole in the road; he tripped, started to fall forward, only to find Baptiste reaching forward to catch him.

Lee regained his balance, but this small incident told him that, at least for a few minutes, his safety was assured. The matriarch might have plans for him, but Baptiste meant him no harm. The reception he'd received so far was warm, but that could easily change. Yet if there was a possibility, however remote it might be, that he might be sympathetic to the rebellion's cause. . . .

The last light of day was waning, and the first stars were appearing in the night sky. He turned his head to peer toward the west, searching the heavens for one particular point of light that should be rising there. "Looking for your ship?" Baptiste stopped, allowing Lee to do so as well. "I think it should be coming over around now."

"Yes, it should." There were low clouds upon the western skies, obscuring his view. He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes . . . "Captain Bap-

tiste," he murmured, deliberately keeping his voice low, "have you been able to reach your people on Hammerhead?"

He nodded meaningfully toward Baptiste's satphone. "Direct contact, no," Baptiste replied, speaking quietly as well. The soldiers, distracted by the crowd around them, weren't paying too much attention to the two men. "Too much atmospheric interference. But we've been able to communicate with them via short-range radio." He peered at Lee through the gloom. "Why do you ask?"

Lee hesitated. It was an enormous gamble, and he was all too aware that he was putting many lives at risk, his own included. But if it paid off . . .

"Listen to me," he whispered. "We don't have much time. . . ."

1928—URSS *Alabama*

Once again, the starship was dark and silent, its passageways deserted, its compartments cold and lightless. The only movements aboard were those of the maintenance 'bots as they patrolled the corridors and cabins, making minor repairs here and there, making sure that the vessel remained clean.

In the ring corridor on Deck H1, a 'bot stopped to vacuum a clump of dust it had found beneath a hand-painted mural: a young man, leading a procession of figures across a hilltop, a giant ringed planet looming in the background. It had just completed this minor chore when the floor trembled ever so slightly beneath the adhesive soles of its six legs. Registering the disturbance, the 'bot sent an electronic query to its mother system. A fraction of a second later, the AI instructed the machine to return to its niche; the ship was about to engage in a major course maneuver. The 'bot quickly scurried away, its diodes briefly illuminating a work of art that no one would ever see again.

Three hundred yards from the *Alabama*, a skiff from the *Spirit* was closing in upon the ship when the ship's reaction-control rockets suddenly flared. As the pilot watched, its bow pitched downward until it was pointed at the planet far below. He barely had time to report his observation before *Alabama's* secondary thrusters ignited and the giant vessel began to move away from him.

Grabbing his yoke, the skiff pilot fired his RCRs to take his tiny craft to a safe distance. His precaution was wise, for a few seconds later *Alabama's* main engine came to life, its white-hot flare silently lancing out in space. Through his cockpit window, he watched in awe as the mammoth spacecraft began to fall toward Coyote.

With its main engine burning at full thrust, it took only a few minutes for *Alabama* to reach the troposphere. The ship wasn't designed to land upon a planet, but the deorbit maneuver its captain had programmed into its autopilot guaranteed that it would take a long, shallow dive through the planet's atmosphere. And even though *Alabama* wasn't streamlined, nonetheless it was over five hundred feet long, with a dry weight of nearly forty thousand tons.

Even as the massive cone of its Bussard ram-scoop disintegrated, bow shock formed an orange-red corona around its spherical fuel tank, until the intense heat of atmospheric friction ignited the last remaining fuel. In the last few seconds, the 'bots shut down for good before the explosion ripped apart the forward decks and Leslie Gillis's mural of Prince Rupert was lost for all time.

Yet the *Alabama* survived, if only for a little while longer. Just long enough for it to complete one final mission.

1932—Liberty, New Florida

Robert Lee found Luisa Hernandez waiting for him within the community hall, the place he and the others who'd built it with their bare hands had once called the grange hall. He was pleased to see that the mural of the *Alabama* that graced one of its walls hadn't been taken down; long benches ran down the length of the floor, and the wood-burning stove that they'd installed to heat the room had been removed, but otherwise it was much the way he'd left it.

The hall was vacant, save for several soldiers positioned near the windows. The matriarch stood near the middle of the room, another Union Guard soldier close behind her, a savant standing nearby. As Lee entered, a guardsman stepped in front of him; with no preamble or apologies, he quickly patted Lee down, searching for any hidden weapons. Lee submitted to the search, taking the moment to size up the woman standing before him.

She'd aged quite a bit since the last time he'd seen her; her hair had grown longer, and it was thin and tinged with grey. The lines of her face had become sharper, her stout figure less fulsome. Even so, Lee reflected, there had seldom been any days in which she'd had to skip a meal or nights in which she'd slept in the cold. Others may have starved while she'd tried to sustain a cocoon of comfort around herself, but no one survived Coyote without feeling the hardships of the frontier.

The soldier completed his task, turned to the matriarch and nodded. "Captain Lee," she said, as if none of this had happened. "Good to see you again."

"Matriarch." Behind him, he heard the front doors close, shutting out the crowd that had followed him from the landing field. Only Baptiste had accompanied him inside, and he stood off to one side, his hands behind his back. "You're well, I take it."

"It's been a long winter." An offhand shrug beneath her robe; the same one she'd worn the first time they'd met, Lee observed, yet noticeably faded, patched in several places with swamper hide. "Care to sit?" she asked, gesturing to the nearest table; as her hand rose, he caught a glimpse of pistol holstered beneath her robe. "Perhaps some coffee?"

"No, thank you." Lee remained standing. "Matriarch, about the eruption. . . ."

"Yes, of course." Still maintaining a pose of amicability, she took a seat,

crossing her legs and folding her arms across her chest. "You're concerned about the long-term effects, and I can't blame you. Defiance and the other settlements on Midland will undoubtedly suffer quite a bit from this."

"No question about it, but so will you. New Florida's distance from Mt. Bonestell matters little. This may be the last warm day we'll experience for quite a while. And you know as well as I do how much we depend upon regular crop rotations to keep everyone fed."

"Oh, come now." She gave him a condescending smirk. "I doubt it'll be as serious as you believe. And even if it is, we're not entirely at the mercy of nature. Greenhouses can be built, hydroponics can be implemented. . . ."

"I agree. If we act now, the worst of this can be mitigated. But we can only do so if we're not having to fight each other at the same time. The first thing we must do is bring an end to this conflict."

"Absolutely. No question about it." She was having a hard time keeping a straight face. "I'm more than willing to negotiate terms of surrender."

Lee nodded. "Thank you. I'm pleased to hear this. Our first condition is that the Union Guard must lay down its weapons at once, and . . ."

"Captain! I must . . . come now, be serious! We're discussing *your* surrender, not mine!" Yet even as she laughed at his expense, Lee watched Baptiste move closer to the savant. Behind her back, there was a whispered consultation. He tried to remain calm, even though he knew what was being said.

"I'm quite serious," he continued. "Your forces must surrender at once, beginning with giving up their firearms. If they do so, I promise that no harm will come to any of them, and they'll be treated fairly by . . ."

"Enough." The smile faded from her face as she raised an indulgent hand. "Captain Lee, you've got a good sense of humor, but the joke's gone far enough. Rigil Kent has inflicted some damage upon us, I'll grant you that, but the fact remains that your people are outnumbered by at least ten to one. Not only that, but we have more weapons at our disposal than . . ."

"No, ma'am," Lee said, "you don't. Or at least not for very much longer." And then he turned to Baptiste. "Captain. . . ?"

Hearing his name, he looked away from his private discussion with the savant. "Matriarch," he said, "a few minutes ago Captain Lee advised me to order the emergency evacuation of all personnel from Ft. Lopez. I've done so, but I'm not sure if there's been enough time to . . ."

"You've . . . *what?*?" Standing up, Hernandez turned to stare at him. "What are you. . . ?"

At that instant, from somewhere not far away, they heard the distant sound of gunfire.

For a few seconds, everyone in the room froze, then one of the Union Guard soldiers rushed to the door. He flung it open, and now they could hear small-arms fire from not far away, along with shouts from the crowd outside. The matriarch's bodyguard immediately moved to protect her, while Baptiste sought cover behind a table.

Only the savant and Lee remained where they were. The posthuman was almost placid, his only visible reaction a slight lowering of his head

within his hood, as if he were listening to distant voices no one else could hear. Then his metallic face turned toward Lee, his ruby eyes seeking Lee's own.

"Very good, sir," he said. "Very well played."

1947—Midland Channel

"Hey, you see that?"

Hearing his father's voice from the bow, Barry Dreyfus looked up from his work. For the past hour or so, he and Ted had been clearing ash from the intake ducts of the skimmer's turbofans. It was the second time they'd done so; even after they'd left the lagoon and retreated down the channel, ash had continued to fall upon them, clogging the intakes and threatening to overheat the engines, forcing Paul Dwyer to shut them down before they burned out.

Pathetic. Instead of taking out Ft. Lopez, they were limping home in a crippled skimmer, their mission a failure. Oh, perhaps the Union gyros were grounded, but a few minutes ago they'd spotted a shuttle lifting off from Hammerhead, swiftly rising until it pierced the heavy clouds that shrouded the night sky. At least three more were still on the ground; if the Union could launch one, then they'd soon be able to launch the others. If that happened, the Union would be able to dispatch reinforcements to New Florida.

Then Barry raised his eyes, and these thoughts were forgotten. The sun had long since gone down, but to the west he could see a faint glow within the clouds: a thin halo of light, quickly moving to the east, growing brighter by the moment. At first he thought it might be the shuttle returning to base, but that didn't make any sense. Why would. . . ?

"Holy. . . !" Ted yelled, and in that instant a miniature comet broke through the overcast, a white-hot fireball that painted the underside of the clouds in shades of scarlet and burnt orange as it streaked across the dark heavens. Thinking that it was headed their way, Barry instinctively ducked, until he realized that it was falling toward . . .

"Get down!"

Jack Dreyfus's voice was lost in the sound of the sky being ripped open, and then the fist of an angry god came down upon Hammerhead. Barry threw up his hands, but even with his eyes shut he could see the retinal afterimage of the nuclear blast seared across his plane of vision.

The roar sent him to his knees. He put his head down, feeling the deck rock beneath him. When he opened his eyes again, the first thing he saw was the concussion rippling across the channel, a series of sustained thunderclaps that sent up tiny waves across the dark waters. Then he raised his head, and stared in shock at the distant granite bluff. Where Ft. Lopez once stood, there was now a fire-drenched mushroom shape rising high into the sky.

"What was. . . ?" His voice was a dry croak, without any expression save bewildered astonishment. "What did . . . I don't . . ."

"I'm not sure." Ted's eyes were as wide as his own. "I got a feeling that was something very precious."

1948—Liberty, New Florida

The first shots were already fading in the distance when the advance team reached the boat dock. Jumping from his canoe onto the dock, Carlos crouched low, brought up his rifle, quickly scanned the area through its infrared sights. As before, no soldiers were visible; the dock and the nearby boathouse were deserted.

He reached down to offer Chris a hand, but he was already clambering out of the stern, gun in hand. No time to tie up; they let the canoe drift away as they dashed toward the boathouse. Behind them, more canoes were approaching: a dozen men and women, the strike force to retake the center of Liberty.

The boathouse was the same one where he and Chris had built the canoes they'd used to explore the Great Equatorial River. Carlos didn't give himself a chance to reflect upon that irony as they flattened behind its log walls, taking a moment to assess their situation while they waited for the others to catch up. To the south, they could hear scattered gunfire coming from the direction of Shuttlefield.

"That's Blue Company," Chris whispered. "Clark's guys shouldn't have much trouble. A few guardsmen, some proctors . . . they'll go down easy enough."

Carlos nodded. He was more concerned about what was happening north of Liberty. They had left the rest of Red Company a half-mile upstream, to invade the colony from the opposite direction. With luck, simultaneous incursions from north and south would divert the Union Guard's attention from the creek, giving his team a chance to infiltrate the town center just a few hundred feet away.

"You ready to do this?" The hours they'd spent on the river had left him feeling light-headed; he reached down to massage a cramp in his leg.

"We've got a choice?" Chris glanced back at him. "I mean, if you want to take a nap, go ahead, we'll . . ."

"Never mind." Hearing movement behind them, he looked back, and saw shadowed forms advancing toward them, the weathered boards creaking beneath their boots, Bear's pale blue glow lending a soft luminescence to their faces. Marie was the first to join them, her carbine clasped against her chest. She caught his eye, nodded once. They were all there. Time to move in.

Carlos raised his hand, silently pointed to either side of the shack, then leveled his palm and lowered it: *half of you go this way, the other half go that way, and stay low*. No one had to ask what he meant, or who was going where; they'd rehearsed this phase of the operation many times over the past month, and everyone had memorized Chris's hand-drawn maps of the colony. While a half-dozen Rigil Kent members fell in behind Chris, Marie and five others followed Carlos.

A narrow dirt path led them through brush and tall grass until they came up from behind the community hall. Now they could hear gunfire coming from the north as well; Red Company had apparently engaged the Union Guard. Between the grange and the nearest cabin, he spotted guardsmen emerging from their barracks across Main Street, running toward both Shuttlefield and the north side of Liberty.

The battle for New Florida had begun. Although he was tempted to join the fight, Carlos focused upon his principal task. Raising his hand, he brought his people to a halt, then crouched low and peered through the sourgrass. Light glowed within the windows of the community hall; apparently someone was inside. Good. The matriarch might have taken cover there; since his group's primary objective was capturing her, this left Chris's team clear to achieve their task of taking down the Union Guard barracks.

The clatter of gyro rotors. Carlos looked around, saw aircraft lights rising from Shuttlefield. There was a thin streak of fire from the ground, and a half-second later the gyro exploded. As it plummeted to the ground, he heard distant voices raised in victory. The gunfire resumed, only now they were more sparse. Blue Company had rebelling against a gyro; now the people of Shuttlefield were joining the fight as well, taking out the guardsmen and proctors who'd been their overlords for so long.

Staying as low as possible, Carlos moved his people closer toward the hall. They were less than forty feet from the entrance when a pair of soldiers came around the front of the building. Although people were fighting on either side of them, they were sticking close to the hall. Someone important was inside; he had little doubt about who it was.

Carlos turned around, only to find that Marie was crouched next to him. He pointed toward the soldiers, and she quietly nodded; she knew what to do. Raising herself up on one knee, she propped her rifle against her shoulder, took careful aim at the guardsmen. One shot, and one of them went down; the other barely noticed that his comrade had been hit before the next shot took him down as well. Carlos tried not to notice the grin on his sister's face. It had to be done, and she was an incredible sharpshooter, yet again he felt horror at the pleasure she took from killing people. When this was over . . .

Worry about that later. Carlos jumped up, tore out of the high grass, raced toward the front steps of the hall. He was less than a dozen feet away when the door slammed open and another soldier emerged onto the porch. Seeing Carlos, he whipped up his rifle and fired. Bullets zinged past his left ear as Carlos crouched, aimed, fired. The guardsman fell, his body keeping the door ajar.

Bolting up the stairs, Carlos dashed inside with his rifle raised. The light dazzled him, causing him to blink, and the warmth of the room was suffocating after the cool of the evening, but now he could see several figures standing only a few feet away.

A savant, cloaked in black, standing silently in the background. A Union Astronautica officer half-hidden behind an overturned table. A middle-aged woman in a frayed purple robe, her right hand outstretched, holding a pistol upon . . .

* * *

"Don't shoot!" Lee snapped.

Carlos's expression, so determined just an instant ago, changed to one of bewilderment. It was obvious that Lee was the last person he'd expected to see here. Yet his rifle remained fixed upon the matriarch, his index finger poised upon the trigger.

"What . . . how did you. . . ?" Carlos began. Behind him, several other members of Rigil Kent were rushing into the hall. Seeing Lee, they came to a stop, but no one lowered their weapons.

"I'll tell you later." Lee carefully kept his voice even. "Right now, I want you and everyone else to just calm down."

That wouldn't be easy—outside the building, they could hear the sounds of gunfire—but the last thing he wanted was to have the negotiations end in a shootout. He looked past Carlos to the two men standing closest to the door. "Go out and stand watch. Make sure no one comes in."

They hesitated. "Do it," Carlos said, and they reluctantly went back the way they'd come, leaving the door open. "Captain . . ."

"Not now." Lee returned his attention to Luisa Hernandez. Her pistol, which she had produced the moment her bodyguard had dashed outside, was still aimed straight at him. At that range, she couldn't miss. "I believe we were discussing terms of surrender."

"You had this planned all along." Her voice trembled with barely suppressed rage. "Under a flag of truce, you came here to negotiate peace, knowing that your people were preparing to attack. . . ."

"I didn't plan to be here until just a few hours ago. Carlos wasn't aware of what I was doing . . . were you, Carlos?" The younger man shook his head, but she ignored him. "There's still a way to resolve this peacefully, Matriarch. There's no reason why more of your people should die . . . and believe me, your troops are outnumbered."

The left corner of her mouth flickered in a sardonic smile. "For now," she said, her gun still leveled upon him, "but not much longer. Oh, you may be able to take control, but for how long? I can have reinforcements from Ft. Lopez here within an hour."

Lee looked over at Baptiste. He had risen from behind the table he'd kicked over, and now he stood silently nearby, a mute witness to the endgame. "Captain. . . ?"

"Matriarch . . ." He cleared his throat. "Ma'am, it's my sad duty to report that Ft. Lopez has been destroyed. Captain Lee informed me of this just before we arrived."

Her eyes widened. "How . . . you can't know this! Why would you trust his word. . . ?"

"It's true." For the first time, Savant Hull spoke up. "While you've been . . . um, engaged in negotiations . . . I've accessed the *Spirit*. Sixteen minutes ago, a force as yet unknown struck Hammerhead, obliterating our base there. . . ."

"That force was the *Alabama*," Lee interrupted. "Before I left, I preset its guidance system for a deorbit trajectory that would bring it down upon Ft. Lopez. I gambled that, even if most of the forward section disin-

tegrated during atmospheric entry, the engine's fusion reactor would survive long enough to reach the ground."

"He didn't do it without fair warning." Baptiste stepped around the table. "After he arrived here, he informed me of what he'd done. That gave me a chance to contact Ft. Lopez and order an emergency evacuation of all troops. I did so before we . . ."

"Thank you, Captain. Well done." Hernandez looked at Hull again. "And were the troops evacuated?"

"One shuttle was able to lift off before the base was destroyed. From what I've been able to gather, it carried eighty-eight survivors. They're now en route to the *Spirit*."

Lee winced as he heard this. He glanced at Baptiste. "My apologies, Captain. I'd hoped you might be able to rescue more."

"I'm sure you did," Hernandez said coldly. "Captain Baptiste, make contact with the shuttle, tell it to change course. It's to land here, with the objective of . . ."

"No, ma'am. I refuse."

She gaped at him in astonishment. "What did you say?"

Baptiste assumed a formal military position: feet spread apart, hands locked together behind his back, back rigid and chin uplifted. "It's my judgment," he continued, staring straight ahead, "that the objectives of this mission . . . that is, to establish a self-sustaining colony upon this world . . . have been neglected by a personal desire for . . ."

"Get those soldiers on the ground!"

"It's over, Matriarch." Lee spoke softly, but his quiet voice carried more force than her outraged shout. "Captain Baptiste knows the truth, and I suspect the savant does as well. You can't conquer a place whose people don't want to be conquered. The most you can do is occupy it for a short time. Ancient Rome learned this, and so did Nazi Germany and the United Republic . . . those who want to be free will remain free, at any cost, even their own lives."

All this time, Hernandez had held the pistol upon him. Now she seemed to shrink in upon herself, like a woman who had once worn iron as an exoskeleton and suddenly found it replaced by mere flesh. The pistol wavered, shook within her grasp; Lee found himself remembering the last time he'd stared down a gun barrel, many years ago aboard the *Alabama*.

"What is it that you want?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"Removal of all Union Guard troops from Coyote. Relinquishment of all territorial claims by the Western Hemisphere Union. Return of the *Spirit* to Earth, along with anyone who wishes to go back. . . ."

"Of course." Her hand dropped, as if tired of holding the gun for so long. Her eyes were dull, registering hopeless defeat. "It's all yours. You win."

Lee fell silent. All the years of hardship, all the years of revolution, had come to this moment: a quiet surrender, in a place he'd once helped build. His namesake had surrendered inside a courthouse in Appomattox, with his defeated troops gathered just outside; this evening, with the last few shots of battle dying off in the distance, his own war was drawing to a close.

Turning away from the matriarch, he found Carlos waiting nearby. To

his relief, the younger man had lowered his rifle. That was a good start. "Tell your people to cease. . . ."

"Robert!"

Gunshots from behind him, then something slammed into his back: three bullets that punched through his spine, his lungs, his heart. His mind barely had time to register the pain before his muscles lost control and he pitched forward, his hands grasping at the unexpected wetness at his chest. He hit the floor face-first, barely able to think, unable to move.

Everything came to him as a hollow roar of sensation—gunshots, voices, hands grasping at him. He fell over on his back, saw Carlos staring down at him even as his vision began to form a lightless tunnel. He heard something pounding, at first with loud persistence, and then much more slowly. Carlos was saying something to him—*Captain, can you hear me?*—but he could barely comprehend the meaning of the words.

Beneath the pain there was a warm inviting pillow. He felt himself falling into it. Yet there was one last thing he had to say before he rested. . . .

He spoke, hoping that Carlos heard him. Then darkness closed in upon him.

2614—Shuttlefield, New Florida

Within the stark glare of the Union shuttle's landing lights, a long row of bodies lay upon the ground, each wrapped in a black plastic bag. One at a time, a pair of guardsmen picked up their fallen comrades and carried them up the ramp, where other soldiers secured them to the deck with cargo nets. Twenty-two bodies in all, including that of the matriarch; Carlos couldn't tell which was hers, and he was reluctant to ask.

"I'm sorry it had to end like this," he said quietly, careful not to raise his voice lest it break the silence. "I know that sounds awful, but if there could have been any other way. . . ."

"You don't have to apologize." Baptiste stood next to him, watching the dead being taken away. The night was cold, and his hands were shoved in the pockets of the military-issue parka someone had given him. "In fact, I'd prefer that you didn't. These men died in the line of duty. It's not for you to say whether it was right or wrong."

Carlos didn't know what to say to this. He'd killed one of these men himself; the fact that he'd done so to liberate his home mattered very little at this moment. Sometime the next day, he'd have to bury some of his own: twelve Rigil Kent members, along with seven colonists from Shuttlefield and Liberty who'd given up their lives in the name of freedom.

And one more, whose death weighed upon him most of all.

"But you're right." Baptiste looked down at the ground "There could . . . there should have been another way. This world belongs to you, and we had no right to take it from you." He looked up at Carlos. "If there's anyone who is owed an apology. . . ."

"Thank you, but . . . maybe you're right. Anything you'd say now would only be an insult."

Baptiste said nothing, but simply nodded before turning his face away. Within the ring of armed men surrounding the landing field, Carlos watched Union Guard soldiers marching aboard other shuttles. With their guns taken away, they represented the defeated remnant of the force that had once held New Florida. Among them were several dozen civilians: a handful of Union loyalists, but mainly those colonists who'd simply decided that they'd had enough of Coyote. More would join them before the last shuttle lifted off early the next morning, but Baptiste had assured him that the *Spirit* had enough biostasis cells to accommodate everyone who wanted to return to Earth.

"Are there going to be more?" Carlos asked. "I mean, will the Union send more ships out here?"

"I don't know," Baptiste shrugged. "My ship was the last one in the fleet . . . and believe me, they were expensive to build. But that was almost fifty years ago, and I don't know what's happened since then. For all I know, there could be more on the way . . . or none at all."

"But Savant Hull will be awake during the journey, right?" Carlos had seen him board the shuttle just a few minutes ago. Baptiste nodded. "Then tell him to send a message to any ships they see coming this way. Tell them that . . ."

He took a deep breath. "Tell them that this is our home. We want freedom, and we'll fight to keep it that way. Tell them, Captain."

Baptiste didn't respond. Once more, his eyes returned to the bodies of the fallen guardsmen. "I believe you," he said at last, his voice low, "and I'll pass the word along, but tell me one thing. . . ."

"Yes?"

"What are you going to do now?" Baptiste turned to look him in the eye. "You've won your freedom. So what are you going to do with it?"

Carlos met his gaze without blinking. "We'll do what we've always done best. We'll survive."

For a long while, the two men regarded one another in silence. Then Baptiste offered his hand, and Carlos took it. "Good luck to you," Baptiste said. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

Then he turned away, joining the procession of men, both living and dead, going aboard the shuttle that would take them back to the *Spirit*, and, eventually, back to Earth. In the days to come, Carlos would regret never having thanked Baptiste for the choice he'd made, and he'd regret that he'd failed to recognize at the time that the man's last words echoed something that had been said to Lee a long time ago.

After Baptiste disappeared within the craft, Carlos watched the last few Union Guard soldiers march up the ramp. It slowly rose upward, then the hatch closed behind it. He stepped back as the ascent jets whined to life. A ragged cheer rose from the crowd as the shuttle slowly lifted off, and a few people fired their guns into the air. All he felt was exhaustion, as if the weight of a world had settled upon his shoulders.

Coyote was free. Yet Robert Lee's last words haunted him, echoing through his mind: *It's yours . . . it's yours . . . it's yours. . . .* ○

Introduction

Okay, troops, by now you know the drill: time to survey the latest exciting offerings from the indy/alternative/small press scene.

Miscellaneous Titles

The English-language SF and fantasy and horror genres offer so many riches that Anglophone readers are often disinclined to search out the stories of other tongues. Our ignorance of many foreign traditions that would enrich our literary lives is sad. But now, thanks to Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier and their new Black Coat Press, we can dip into a fertile stream of French fabulism in translation. Their first book (more are referenced below, under "Novels") functions as a kind of survey, as its subtitle indicates. *Shadowmen: Heroes and Villains of French Pulp Fiction* (trade paper, \$19.95, 304 pages, ISBN 0-9740711-3-7) is an encyclopedia that's as much fun to read as a fine novel. Organized alphabetically by the names of the characters under discussion, the volume is replete with author biographies, plot synopses, discussions of media representations of these works, and a host of fascinating trivia. To learn about such fairly famous characters as Fantômas and such obscure ones as Belphegor via the breezy yet scholarly prose of the Lofficiers (well-

known for their comic-book scripts and some other reference works) is to acquire a painless education in cosmopolitanism.

Jeff VanderMeer's *The Day Dali Died* (Prime Books, trade paper, \$9.99, 122 pages, ISBN 1-894815-92-0) combines poetry with "flash fictions," vignettes that also concentrate on depth of textured language. As is to be expected from the mushroom-fertile mind of VanderMeer, these offerings evoke gorgeous word-pictures of odd and affecting events and places. An enormous beached whale gutted by gawkers; a retired Kissinger in Cambodia; a prisoner under torture who learns to fly—these and many more startling concatenations make this book a hallucinatory joy. The poem "The Ship at the End of the World," appearing in print here for the first time anywhere, is equal to any gem by Dunsany.

George Sterling (1869-1926) is a poet whose name is more familiar than his actual work to modern readers of the fantastic. "The pupil of Ambrose Bierce and the mentor to Clark Ashton Smith," as editor S.T. Joshi classifies him, Sterling once had a mainstream reputation of some small notoriety. But his verse has been generally inaccessible till now, a failing remedied by the issuance of *The Thirst of Satan* (Hippocampus Press, trade paper, \$15.00, 215 pages, ISBN 0-9721644-6-4). Whether extracting ornate, metaphysical stanzas from cosmological vistas, as in "The Testimony

of the Suns," or conducting a tour of exotic archaic wonders as in "A Wine of Wizardry," Sterling could be counted on for startling metaphors, sardonic insights, and impeccable verse construction. This book, carefully assembled and annotated by Joshi, restores to twenty-first-century readers an important missing link in the history of weird literature.

Mike Resnick, as his many enthusiastic readers can attest, has a light and conversational writing style that promises and mostly delivers easy access to his thoughts and concerns and judgments. Yet sometimes that style can betray with imprecision or slightness of effect. Both Resnick's virtues and flaws—the former thankfully predominant—are on display in *Resnick at Large* (Wildside, trade paper, \$19.95, 283 pages, ISBN 1-59224-160-3). Collecting Resnick's essays from many sources, this book spans a wide range of topics, from SF to softcore porn of the 1960s to horse racing. Perhaps most affecting, blending rueful laughs with sadness, is "And in This Corner—the Florida Health Care System!" Here Resnick details the bureaucratic madness attendant on his dying father's last years. As for certain infelicities, one example will suffice: talking about the danger of becoming a soured hack in "A Writer's Touchstones," Resnick says he didn't want to become "the mirror image of Malzberg's unhappy writer." The metaphor of "mirror image," as I understand it, connotes the subtly linked opposite of something, not an exact duplicate.

Fantagraphics Books bills the newest installment (Number 14) of its regular series *Blab!* (trade paper, \$19.95, 120 pages, ISBN 1-56097-

557-1) as "the preeminent anthology of graphic design and illustration arts," and it would be hard to disagree with this proud description. The oversized color volume features so many fine stories and eye-popping illustrations from alternative-comics auteurs—many of the entries employing the fantastical imagery beloved of SF readers—that one would be hard-pressed not to find manifold pleasures within its pages. Greg Clarke's "The Forlorn Fungus" tells the witty story of a sentient truffle and its misuse by a diverse cast of humans. "I Built You First," by Hoey and Freund, depicts with geometric exactitude a pair of rival robots conducting their war amid Escheresque landscapes. "Enfer-de" by Blanquet is a Boschian two-page spread that would give Charles Burns nightmares. Mark Landman's "Fetal Elvis" manages to satirize the notion of Homeland Security by using a most unlikely protagonist. And Elvis crops up again to battle mutant Martian teddy bears (with the aid of Finland's president!) in the bizarre "Hard-boiled Kekkonen," by Matti Hagelberg. And these are only a few of the over two dozen gems within this superb showcase.

The French musician Richard Pinhas has long been a partisan of SF, from the moment his band Heldon (1974-1979) took its name from the writings of Norman Spinrad. In his latest CD, *Tranzition* (Cuneiform Records, \$13.00, 62:28 minutes, Cuneiform Rune 186), Pinhas creates eerie yet soothing soundscapes that could serve as aural accompaniments to either subatomic or interstellar (or even intrabody) journeys. Alternately ethereal and jagged, hypnotic and aggressive, these five tracks fea-

ture Pinhas on guitar and various electronics; Philippe Simon on violin; Antoine Paganotti on drums; and Jérôme Schmidt on "laptop." Track 2, "Moumoune girl (a song for)" is layered with samples from a tape of Philip K. Dick reading one of his own essays, a tape which Dick himself gave to Pinhas. The effect of hearing Dick over Pinhas's rarefied electronic warbling is both tonic and spooky. This sprightly, somber music will surely appeal to anyone who has ever enjoyed the work of Robert Fripp and Brian Eno, melodies which reflect both intellectual agendas and emotional assaults.

Anthologies

A lively, handsome little theme anthology is to be found in the form of *Intracities* (UnWrecked Press, chapbook, \$5.00, 54 pages, ISBN unavailable). Editor Michael Jasper here arranges a baker's dozen of tales focusing on the odd and uncanny niches to be found in such diverse cities as Phoenix, Montreal, Oakland, and London. With slipstreamy verve, the fourteen writers (there's one collaboration) present narratives about a spectral car mechanic (Mark Siegel's "Heat"); a reluctant Dalai Lama (Jason Erik Lundberg's "Enlightenment"); and a mythic railroadman (Jay Lake's "Iron Heaven"), among many other themes. And a striking wraparound collage by Frank Wu complements the whole package nicely.

The "spicy pulps" were a line of fiction zines in the 1930s that specialized in the risqué. Sequestered under counters, with their crude B&W illos of undraped maidens and their over-the-top narratives of

lustful monsters, human and otherwise, they represented the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Pulp Entertainment. To purchase an original issue today would set you back hundreds of dollars. Or you could simply opt to pick up a highly entertaining facsimile edition from Wildside, *Spicy Mystery Stories for August 1935* (trade paper, \$19.95, 128 pages, ISBN 0-8095-9229-0). Reading these stories in a concentrated burst functions as a veritable time machine. From Robert Leslie Bellem's tale of Nazi fraternal mind-swapping, "The Executioner," to E. Hoffman Price's sophisticated and fairly restrained adventure with a snake-woman, "Naga's Kiss," these tales serve up a perverse banquet of nostalgic thrills. Never has the female breast—aka, the "vibrant mound"—played such an intrinsic role in fiction before or since. Yet perhaps, as certain televised "wardrobe malfunctions" show us, our culture has barely changed at all.

Cecilia Tan's Circlet Press celebrates its tenth anniversary with *Erotic Fantastic* (trade paper, \$19.95, 356 pages, ISBN 1-885865-44-9), a sampler culled from the more than forty books they've published in that span. This volume functions as an excellent introduction to the vast range of material that Circlet offers. From whimsically libidinous to hardcore, from contemporary settings to outré kingdoms of the imagination, utilizing tropes from SF, fantasy, and horror, these stories embody nearly every sexual persuasion possible. Familiar names such as Francesca Lia Block, Catherine Asaro, and Shariann Lewitt consort with writers of equal talent yet lesser prominence. If you're looking for erotica

mixed with speculative elements, or speculation flavored with sex, this is the place to be.

With *Island Dreams: Montreal Writers of the Fantastic* (Véhicule Press, trade paper, \$12.95, 240 pages, ISBN 1-55065-171-4), editor Claude Lalumière has assembled one of the best original anthologies of the year. Pleasingly heavy on cyberpunk visions of the future, yet with a fair smattering of slipstream and fantasy, this book strikes a beautiful balance among fabulist modes. Yves Menard hits notes of Ballardian excellence in "In Yerusalem," his tale of an alien city plonked down in the middle of North America, while Glenn Grant roars on overdrive through his future police procedural, "Burning Day." Melissa Yuan-Innes delivers a Bradburyian shocker in "Mrs. Marigold's House" and Mark Shainblum does military SF intelligently and gracefully in "Endogamy Blues." The other eight contributors are no dull mooseheads either. Highly recommended.

Under the editorship of Deborah Layne and Jay Lake, *Polyphony 3* (Wheatland Press, trade paper, \$17.95, 386 pages, ISBN 0-9720547-3-1) practically explodes with superlative stories. This is one series of anthologies that just keeps getting better and better. A mix of award-winning authors (Michael Bishop, Barry Malzberg, Jack Dann, Don Webb) and talented newbies, and a blend of different modes of fabulism and different tones, all insure that just when the reader imagines he knows where the volume is headed, he's proved delightfully wrong. Perhaps the single story that best encapsulates the spirit of the whole volume is Jeffrey Ford's "Coffins on the River," which

veers organically all over a map that includes frustrated artists, drug-induced visions, kidnapped children, and suburban ennui. This collection demands and deserves a place of honor on your shelves.

Single-Author Collections

Small Beer Press continues to foster new talent via the excellent medium of affordable, gorgeously designed chapbooks. These offerings are the perfect way to get to know new writers economically and yet impactfully. The two latest from Small Beer are Christopher Rowe's *Bittersweet Creek and Other Stories* (\$5.00, 62 pages, ISBN unavailable) and Benjamin Rosenbaum's *Other Cities* (\$5.00, 42 pages, ISBN unavailable). Rowe's work might remind you of that of Andy Duncan. Both exemplify an archetypically Southern viewpoint on life's mysteries, a worldview that admits marvels in the most common of circumstances and narrates those unreal intrusions in a kind of down-home manner that belies real sophistication. In "Baptism at Bittersweet Creek," for instance, a strange wild boy found in a woodland pool brings a fruitful chaos to a small town. Benjamin Rosenbaum, on the other hand, comes from a different tradition entirely, that of Calvino, Borges, and Lem. His linked vignettes all concern miraculous cities of the mind, places where life is vastly different from our mundane sphere, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Rosenbaum's fertile sense of invention and his sly humor ("Ponge, as its inhabitants will tell you, is a thoroughly unattractive city. 'Well,' they always say at

the mention of any horrible news, 'we do live in Ponge.'") make these parables a real treat.

The short-short stories (and one long one) in Joe Lansdale's *The King and Other Stories* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, \$40.00, 96 pages, ISBN 1-931081-98-0) display the patented Lansdale mix of black humor, macabre exuberance and contemporary pop-culture grounding that his readers have come to delight in. Like a cross between Frederic Brown and the Brothers Grimm, Lansdale delivers "little pokes of the elbow," as he calls them in his introduction. The twisted climaxes are sometimes telegraphed, but most often arrive with genuine surprise. The behavior of a pair of ghostly boots in the story titled simply "Boots" is a case in point. This volume is as much fun as viewing a marathon of old Hitchcock television episodes.

Known today almost entirely for his most famous story, "Deadline," which brought down the wrath of the FBI on John W. Campbell for its detailed description of an A-bomb in the midst of Manhattan Project secrecy, Cleve Cartmill was in his time a prolific and deft contributor to the SF zines. Now we can all sample his work, thanks to Darkside Press's volume, the first of five of his collected fantastic fiction, titled *Prelude to Armageddon* (hardcover, \$40.00, 276 pages, ISBN 0-9740589-2). On display here are several *Unknown-Worlds*-style stories, two of which—"No Graven Image" and "Youth, Anybody?"—prefigure Ron Goulart's comic Hollywood-occult tales, while the third (the title piece) seems to me to be a lineal ancestor to Philip K. Dick's *The Cosmic Puppets* (1957), with its heavenly forces

battling through human intermediaries. Eight other stories—including "Deadline," of course—traverse a wide spectrum of writing, proving in total that Cartmill had a lot to offer beyond the single piece that's most attached to his name. Editor John Pelan provides a knowledgeable introduction, and the entire handsome package testifies to the loving care invested in this effort to rescue Cartmill from undeserved oblivion.

W.H. Pugmire is upfront about his idols: Lovecraft and his circle, and William Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde. His desire is to produce works that pay stylistic and thematic homage to these men, while still attaining a unique voice. I think he succeeds admirably in the linked stories of *Sesqua Valley and Other Haunts* (Delirium Books, hardcover, \$50.00, 242 pages, ISBN 1-929653-37-9). *Sesqua Valley* is the West Coast sister city, more or less, to Arkham and Dunwich and environs, and the ghastly doings there are fully as eldritch as anything Massachusetts has to offer. Characters appear and disappear throughout these narratives—one standout figure is the wizardly Simon Gregory Williams—most of them meeting grim yet somehow elegant endings. Pugmire's devotion to his sources transcends mere pastiche, and his style is neither overwrought nor too sparse. And his generous afterwords to the stories—several tales are original to this volume, by the way—are an endearing window onto his literary theory and motivations.

It takes a rare talent to follow in the footsteps of Jorge Luis Borges without stumbling and falling, but Rhys Hughes might just be good enough to do so. His "sequel" to a

Borges book is titled *A New Universal History of Infamy* (Ministry of Whimsy Press, hardcover, \$25.00, 180 pages, ISBN 1-892389-83-5), and it's formatted along the same lines as the inspirational original, being a mix of imaginary biographies, stories, vignettes, parodies and assorted other jests. In his other, non-homage work, Hughes has exhibited an antic mind and a rollicking prose style, and those are both on display here, but muted somewhat to a more formally elegant manner. The biographies are outstanding portraits of various madcaps and monsters, condensing whole lives into a few pages. And such standalone stories as "Finding the Book of Sand," wherein Hughes posits that burning a book that manifests an infinite number of pages could solve the world's energy crisis, provide both laughter and thought-provoking conceits.

Novels and Novellas

The essence of Lovecraftian horror, I've come to believe, is a Joycean obsession with the "nightmare of history," the unshakeable burden of one's personal past and the vast historic panorama of the species. This neurosis forms the entertaining but limited core of Brian Lumley's *The House of the Temple* (Endeavor Press, hardcover, \$45.00, 116 pages, ISBN 0-9728656-3-2), a Lovecraft pastiche originally printed in 1980. (A comic short story, "Swamped," is also included in this limited-run volume, with art by Alan Clark and Allen Koszowski.) Writer John McGilchrist and his artist friend Carl Earلمان return to the McGilchrist ancestral home in Scotland and slowly but surely

begin to uncover clues to a mysterious inhabitant of a small pond on the estate. Needless to say, all does not turn out well. Moving along as sedately and as comfortably as an Agatha Christie novel, this tale does not offer shock and horror so much as reassurance that the old bugbears are still potent enough to make faces outside our window at night for our amusement.

Fans of Kage Baker's series involving the time-traveling immortals known as the Company will delight in her new Company novella, *The Angel in the Darkness* (Golden Gryphon Press, trade paper, \$15.95, 76 pages, ISBN unavailable). Focusing on the mundane yet gripping domestic travails of a middle-aged mother named Maria Aguilar, the story swiftly moves into mysterious waters with signs that Maria's uncle Porfirio, supposedly long dead, is alive and being harassed by enigmatic forces. A final confrontation allows Maria to shine as a brave mother protecting her child, while not neglecting the ramifications of the war between various factions of time travelers. Baker writes both suspenseful and quotidian scenes well, and blends them into a tasty tortilla.

The mission of Black Coat Press is to introduce under-appreciated French titles of a fantastic bent to an English-speaking audience. As their first fiction entry, *Doctor Omega* (trade paperback, \$19.95, 257 pages, ISBN 0-9740711-1-0) does an admirable job of enticing readers into the Black Coat enterprise. Written by Arnould Galopin and released in 1906, the book has been "adapted and retold" by Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier. To my eye, they've done a subtle job. Modern terms such as "black hole" and

"quark" have been introduced, but the rest of the book remains resolutely Edwardian, in a Gallic fashion. The titular doctor, a mysterious figure from another time and place, recruits two Frenchmen to accompany him on the first trip to Mars in his rocket clad in gravity-defying "stellite." Once there, they encounter a host of wondrous creatures and become involved in a local war. Reminiscent both of Stanley Weinbaum and Doc Smith, this rollicking tale never disappoints.

Black Coat's other three offerings all revolve around the work of Paul Féval (1816-1887), a prolific author whose series of books under the heading *Les Habits Noirs* provides the derivation for this press's name. Masterfully translated, annotated, and introduced by Brian Stableford, these three novels illustrate the nascent "cloak and dagger" school of serialized fiction, a format that fed into the roots of modern SF and fantasy. Published in 1855, *The Vampire Countess* (trade paperback, \$22.95, 351 pages, ISBN 0-9740711-5-3) follows the efforts of a hunter of the undead named Jean-Pierre Séverin as he strives to thwart the evil vampire known as the Countess Marcian Gregoryi as she stalks Paris not for mere blood but for the raw scalps of her victims, which confer on her everlasting life. The book is full of secret chambers, daring flights and lovesick protagonists, a veritable catacomb of shivers. In *Knightshade* (trade paperback, \$16.95, 176 pages, ISBN 0-9740711-4-5), first published in 1860, we witness the sometimes comic depredations of two supernatural brigands, the Brothers Ténèbre, as they plunder the nobility in an insouciant manner. Stableford in his afterword makes a good case for this pair be-

ing unacknowledged prototypes for many future pulp villains, but even if their lineage had ended here, they would still be worth reading. But surely the most enticing of the three volumes, the most over-the-top and proto-postmodern, is 1867's *Vampire City* (trade paper, \$19.95, 199 pages, ISBN 0-9740711-6-1). With demented genius, Féval takes as his heroine the real-world literary figure Ann Radcliffe, whose Gothic novels inspired him. He sets Ann and her manservant Grey Jack on the trail of a vampire known as Otto Goetzi, a trail that leads straight to Sepulchre, the city of the undead. In his bizarre, pre-*Dracula* formulation of what it means to be a vampire, Féval creates a figure of weird menace. The contrast with Ann's simple yet dogged virtues makes for a wild, knockabout farce that will leave you alternately chuckling and shaking your head.

In *Prometheus: the autobiography* (Crossquarter Publishing, trade, \$13.50, 165 pages, ISBN 1-890109-77-0), Uncle River has produced a challenging, stimulating hybrid of fictional memoir, philosophical tract and invigorating rant. Narrated in the first person by the fire-bringer god himself, the book sweeps across all of history to examine the roots of our current malaise. Like H.G. Wells in his latter period, River has pondered long and hard on the intractability of the human race, its own worst enemy. River and Prometheus raise more questions than answers—only suitably, since Prometheus says, "As my name . . . means 'Foresight,' that job is not to decree the future but to look ahead." And look the god does, oftentimes in the classic humorous American manner of a Mark Twain or sometimes like

Robert Heinlein at his most platitudinous. This is a book with psychological, spiritual, and practical depths, that should spark much thought in the reader who cares about humanity's origins and destination.

Horror writers Simon Clark and Tim Lebbon, both formidable in their own right, join forces in their first large-scale venture to produce *Exorcising Angels* (Earthling Publications, trade paperback, \$35.00, 87 pages, ISBN 0-9721518-8-5), and the resulting collaboration is equal to any of their solo works, and perhaps even indicative of some new plateau for both men. Their tale features as protagonist none other than the famed fantasist Arthur Machen, and revolves around what is arguably Machen's most famous work, "The Bowmen." Published at the nadir of Great Britain's fortunes during World War One, Machen's story went on to become a national legend that influenced the course of history. In their tale, Clark and Lebbon construct a visitor named Delamere Smith who seeks out the aged Machen at a similar crisis point in British history: the Blitz of London by the Nazis. Having survived a WWI battle in a manner related to Machen's story, Smith is now convinced that Machen holds the key to Britain's survival under the present bombardment. The two men quest through the shattered streets of London, encountering ghosts and mysteries and dangers, until a final revelation strikes each quester separately. Elegaic, restrained, cinematic yet literary, this novella de-

livers plenty of punch for its size. Additionally, each author contributes a solo story and some critical matter. And the limited paperback is accompanied by an even more exclusive hardcover (\$175.00, ISBN 0-9721518-9-3).

Publisher Addresses

Black Coat Press, POB 17270, Encino, CA 91416. Circlet Press, 1770 Mass. Ave, #278, Cambridge, MA 02140. Crossquarter Publishing, POB 8756, Santa Fe, NM 87504. Cuneiform Records, POB 8427, Silver Spring, MD 20907. Darkside Press, 4128 Woodland Park Avenue N, Seattle, WA 98103. Delirium Books, POB 338, North Webster, IN 46555. Earthling Publications, 12 Pheasant Hill Drive, Shrewsbury, MA 01545. Endeavor Press, 1515 Hickory Wood Drive, Annapolis, MD 21401. Fantagraphics Books, 7563 Lake City Way NE, Seattle, WA 98115. Golden Gryphon Press, 3002 E. Perkins Road, Urbana, IL 61802. Hippocampus Press, POB 641, New York, NY 10156. Ministry of Whimsy Press, POB 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315. Prime Books, see Wildside Press. Small Beer Press, 176 Prospect Ave., Northampton, MA 01060. Subterranean Press, POB 190106, Burton, MI 48519. UnWrecked Press, 9636 Waterwood Court, Wake Forest, NC 27587. Véhicule Press, POB 125, Place du Parc Station, Montréal, Québec, Canada H2W 2M9. Wheatland Press, POB 1818, Wilsonville, OR 97070. Wildside Press, POB 301, Holicong, PA 18928. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

L ACon IV's rates rise September 12th, so get your checks postmarked pronto. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 2004

- 10-12—CopperCon. For info, write: Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. Or phone: (602) 973-2341 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) coppercon.org. (E-mail) cu24@coppercon.org. Con will be held in: Phoenix AZ (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Embassy Suites Phoenix North, I-17 & Greenway. Guests will include: A.D. Foster, T. Lockwood, L. Fish.
- 17-19—Nan Desu Kan. www.ndk.cc. Holiday Inn Denver International Airport, I70 & Chambers, Denver CO. Anime.
- 24-26—FenCon, Box 560576, The Colony TX 75056. fencon.org. Holiday Inn North, Dallas TX. Niven, Moon, Elrod.
- 24-26—Anime Weekend, Box 13544, Atlanta GA 30324. (404) 364-9773. awa-con.com. Sheraton Gateway, Atlanta GA.
- 30-Oct. 3—Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MA 63132. stiff.org. Holiday Inn, Collinsville IL. A.D. Foster, Di Fate, Ben Bova.

OCTOBER 2004

- 1-3—Arcana, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 721-5959. Holiday Inn Bandana Sq. St. Paul MN. Tim Powers.
- 1-3—ConText, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. context@lycos.com. Ramada Plaza. Connie Willis. For written SF.
- 1-3—ConJecture, Box 927388, San Diego CA 92192. conjecture.org. Doubletree, Mission Valley. Friedman, Heinig.
- 3-8—Viable Paradise, c/o Box 253, Franklin MA 02038. mvsfa@mail.com. Martha's Vineyard MA. Writers' workshop.
- 7-10—World Mystery Con, c/o 507 S. 8th, Philadelphia PA 19147. shp@erols.com. Crowne Plaza, Toronto ON. L. Davis.
- 8-10—AlbaCon, Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. albacon.org. committee@albacon.org. Crowne Plaza. David Drake.
- 8-10—VCon, Main Floor, 2216 MacDonald, Vancouver BC V6K 3Y4. v-con.com. Hilton, Burnaby BC. Dave Duncan.
- 15-17—CapClave, 4030 8th St. S., Arlington VA 22204. wsfa.org. Marriott, Tysons Corner VA (near DC). Nick Pollota.
- 22-24—VegaCon, 2800 Las Vegas Blvd. S. #11, Las Vegas NV 89101. (877) 881-5207. Plaza Hotel. General SF/fantasy.
- 28-31—World Fantasy Con, c/o Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. leprecon.org. J. Wurts, E. Dattlow.
- 29-31—JVL Con, 1316 Monterey Ln, Janesville WI 53546. (608) 758-7320. Ramada. Barbara Marsh, Camden Toy.
- 29-31—Anime USA, Box 1073, Herndon VA 20172. animeusa.org. Sheraton, Tysons Corner VA (near DC).

NOVEMBER 2004

- 5-7—United Fan Con, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. (781) 986-8735. Marriott, Springfield MA. SG-1, *Doctor Who*.
- 6-13—Cruise Trek, 23852 Pacific Coast Hwy. #385, Malibu CA 90265. (310) 456-7544. Caribbean cruise. *Star Trek*.
- 12-14—WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. windycon.org. Radisson O'Hare, Rosemont IL. Sawyer, Jael, Dobson.
- 19-21—OryCon, Box 5464, Portland OR 97228. (503) 422-6574. orycon.org. General SF/fantasy convention.
- 19-21—Midwest Fur Fest, Box 2574, Glen Ellyn IL 60138. furfest.org. Hyatt, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL. Furies.
- 26-28—LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., North Hollywood CA 91601. loscon.org. Airport Hilton, Burbank CA.

AUGUST 2005

- 4-8—Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk. Glasgow Scotland. \$170£95.

SEPTEMBER 2005

- 1-5—CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org. The NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. \$75.

AUGUST 2006

- 23-27—LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com. Anaheim CA. Willis. The WorldCon. \$125.

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NEXT ISSUE

DECEMBER ISSUE

Next issue is our December Special Holiday Issue (even though I'm writing about it in July, here in the Wacky World of Magazine Publishing), and so in accordance with long tradition, we're bringing you a Christmas story—we're bringing you *two* of them, in fact, although both are rather odd and *un*traditional takes on the Christmas tradition. First, New Zealand writer **Peter Friend**, making his *Asimov's* debut, takes us to a distant planet in the far future for a study of the persistence of tradition even under the most unusual of circumstances, as an impoverished tribe undertakes the dangerous job of trimming "The Christmas Tree." Then **James Van Pelt** returns to give us a poignant lesson in the kind of "Echoing" that can take place on the lonely winter highways of America during the holiday season.

But if you're the sort who sympathizes with Scrooge rather than Tiny Tim, and who chases Christmas carolers from the doorstep, don't worry—the rest of our December issue ranges far from seasonal concerns.

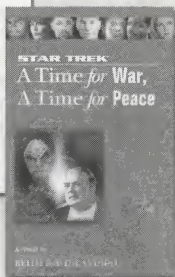
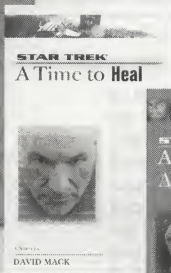
ALSO IN DECEMBER

Hugo-winner **Allen M. Steele** brings the second sequence of his popular "Coyote" stories to a moving conclusion as he invites us to visit the "Home of the Brave"; Hugo and Nebula-winner **Mike Resnick** returns with the bittersweet story of "A Princess of Earth"; new writer **Chris Roberson** makes a brilliant *Asimov's* debut with a tale of deadly cultural conflict on a colonized alien world, where the choice is between "Red Hands, Black Hands"; **Aaron Schutz** returns to these pages after a very long absence (his last sale here was in 1989!) to tell us about the strange problems involved in "Being with Jimmy"; new writer **Paul Melko** gives us a suspenseful look at a dangerous situation in which "Strength Alone" is not enough; new British writer **Neal Asher** gives us to dazzlingly fast-paced introduction to "Strood"; **Keith Ferrell** makes a compelling *Asimov's* debut with the story of an embattled family on a hostile world who must face the subtler dangers of "A Reunion"; and new writer **Elizabeth Counihan** makes a lyrical *Asimov's* debut with a melancholy vision of the last days of the human race, as witnessed by "The Star Called Wormwood."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column explores the case to be made for "A Postage Stamp for Isaac"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column asks "EBooks Again?"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our December Special Holiday Issue on sale at your newsstand on October 12, 2004. Subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you next year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com).

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